

# From the Chisel to the Pencil: The History of Writing and Its Impact on Humanity

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## Abstract

*Taken for granted today, the ability to read and write once ensured that someone could have power and influence in virtually all aspects of ancient society. Truly, the invention of written language thousands of years ago and the creation of a special class of literate individuals known as scribes is what propels the development of human civilizations around the world. This project looks at the invention of written language among four of humanity's earliest civilizations and the specific role that scribes played in society until the mid-fifteenth century. Discover the origin stories of written language, who created it, why it was invented, how it was first practiced, and how the scribal class rose to power and eventually diminished. From the independent development and gradual evolution of writing to the role it played in creating one of the most powerful cross-cultural groups in human history, uncover how writing influenced both the ancient and modern world, and how the ancient and modern world influenced writing.*

## Introduction

Despite being taken for granted today, many don't realize that writing is just about as old as civilization itself and that our idea of civilization would not exist without it. Stretching back thousands of years, writing has been independently developed by various cultures that were isolated from each other by oceans, continents, and centuries. Each culture had their own reasons for needing to develop writing, from religious or spiritual needs to economic and transactional needs, one basic reason has remained a constant: the need to easily and efficiently record and convey information across time and space. This

continuous, centuries-old search to make communication quicker, cheaper, easier, and more efficient ultimately exposes a bothersome pattern in human behavior. Through examining scholarly sources, as well as visual examples of ancient writing styles, it is revealed that humanity shows a general pattern of valuing efficiency over artistic and creative uniqueness [ie. the unique and special details and effort that each writer put into producing each individual piece of written material by hand].

## Genesis of the Written Word

While this project seeks to evaluate the history of writing and how it originated

and developed over time across the globe, there are a few caveats that must be mentioned first. While archaeologists and historians have unearthed writing systems around the world that stretch back thousands of years, several of these early writing systems remain undeciphered. Additionally, some of these languages have, practically speaking, died out entirely and do not have any recognizably significant lasting impacts on today's global use of written language. It is also worth noting that, in some areas, due to geographical closeness to other written language hearths, some early written language scripts may have actually been heavily copied or borrowed from other scripts. Therefore, this project will primarily focus on the earliest written languages that have A: been mostly or completely deciphered, B: are either still in use today or have some uniquely significant lasting impact on modern writing or the history of human civilizations as a whole, and C: have developed completely independently or mostly independently from any other early written languages. Thus, this project will primarily focus on Mesopotamian Cuneiform, which originated around 5,500 years ago; ancient Egyptian Hieroglyphics, about 5,200 years ago; and ancient Chinese characters, nearly 4,100 years ago.

The origins of written language can be hard to pinpoint to an exact moment in history, as one must first define what exactly constitutes "written language". As Kuang Yu Chen notes in her article *Time and Landscape at the Beginning of Chinese Writing*, "Writing is different from spoken language in that speech is temporal and physiological, whereas writing is atemporal and physical, which requires something physical to be written on" (Chen, 2020, p. 324). Because of this, it can be hard to identify when images such as cave paintings or pottery decorations specifically transition into representing a specific word or sound.

However, certainly, each of these cultures would eventually develop their own unique systems and rules that must be followed in order to properly compose a comprehensive piece of writing. These rules would include grammar structure, direction of writing (such as top to bottom and left to right), and assigning both sounds and meanings to these different written symbols.

Once humanity developed writing, the newly invented wheel was put into motion, so to speak, and there was no stopping it. Originally developed for religious or economic purposes, depending on which culture is being observed, writing would expand to being used for, but not limited to: historical, governmental, and entertainment purposes. For instance, it was the job of a royal scribe to keep track of taxes collected for the king and record religious divinations, but it was also their duty to record religious and historical stories in the form of epic poems that served as entertainment to listeners. Additionally, as writing became more widespread, people sought ways to make it more streamlined, as well as making it easier, cheaper, and quicker to produce. This was accomplished with various developments over time, such as the simplification of writing scripts, the invention of the alphabet, finding, creating, and mass producing new and better mediums to write on, using new and better writing utensils that were easier to write with, and the invention of printing itself.

This standardization of writing scripts and loss of artistic uniqueness can be most easily observed in China. As Ji Xiao-bin (2003) notes in their evaluation of Chinese history, writing in China was invented before or during the late Shang Dynasty, and the earliest system of Chinese writing was originally done by hand carving characters on cattle bones or tortoise shells in the form of divination questions to be

asked to ancestral spirits. As the written language spread in use, the characters became more standardized in style and easier to produce with the innovation of calligraphy painting and the mass production of cheap paper. Ever seeking to produce written works even more efficiently and quickly, Chinese engineers would inevitably develop the first movable type printing press using clay blocks, followed by wood blocks, which would have Chinese characters carved onto them. Where previous texts needed to be produced entirely by hand, one character at a time, now they could be mass-produced by using the same character stamp repeatedly. The printing process would ultimately see handwriting become obsolete in many areas of life and simultaneously see the loss of visual uniqueness in each piece of writing, even today.

## **Conclusion**

This gradual simplification and easy mass production of writing would ultimately change the practice from being a niche artistic skill that only a few well-educated people could perform to being one that many people take for granted. It can be clearly seen in real-life examples, such as hand-copied Bibles versus printed Bibles, that as writing became easier to produce, it visually became less artistic and contained less visual uniqueness. However, this gradual loss of artistic flair may be seen most plainly by looking at real-life copies of Chinese oracle bone carvings, handwritten character calligraphy, movable type clay printing, and electronic typing. Throughout history, humanity's desire to innovate and increase efficiency can be seen in virtually all aspects of modern life, and this is particularly true with writing.

### References

- Chen, K. Y. (2020). Time and landscape at the beginning of Chinese writing. *Journal of Chinese Linguistics*, 48(2), 323–341. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27123424>.
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### Recommended Citation

Shell, M. (2025). From the chisel to the pencil: The history of writing and its impact on humanity. *Made in Millersville Journal*, 2025. Retrieved from <https://www.mimjournal.com>