



**Cambridge Assessment
International Education**

English

Stage 4

Paper 1 Non-fiction

Cambridge Primary Progression Test

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The history of writing

The earliest form of writing was developed around 3300 BC by a group of people called the Sumerians who lived in Ancient Mesopotamia. Until then, the Sumerians had mostly lived by hunting, but around that time, they decided to settle in the land between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, where the soil was perfect for growing crops. There they became some of the first farmers. 5

As their way of life developed, the Sumerians needed to remember detailed information about what they were buying and selling and the work the government was doing. So, to help them make permanent records, they developed a system of symbols. This early writing was done on tablets of wet clay with a pointed stick called a stylus. Once the clay dried, the information could be stored for later. 10

In the beginning, Sumerian writing consisted of simple pictures called pictograms. But gradually, the system was extended to include sounds as well as meanings. People who trained as writers were called scribes. They used the stylus to make wedge¹-shaped marks in the clay. This type of writing is called cuneiform writing. 15

Understanding Mesopotamian writing is difficult. This is because there were over 700 symbols. The symbols often varied between cities and many of them changed over time as well. Luckily, experts have deciphered many Sumerian tablets. This is how we have learned so much about Mesopotamian life, government and history. 20

While most of the Sumerian tablets that have been discovered are government and business records, some include poetry, songs, tales of heroes and myths about Mesopotamian gods. 25

About 300 years later, the Ancient Egyptians began to develop a writing system known as hieroglyphics, which used thousands of picture words called hieroglyphs. Some symbols represented entire words, but others represented sounds, just like the letters in English.

One of the aims when writing hieroglyphs was to produce writing that looked beautiful. Since it was quite challenging to write hieroglyphs, becoming a scribe took many years of education and practice, and children started training at six or seven years of age. Being a scribe in Ancient Egypt was considered a good job because they did not have to join the army or pay taxes. Only children from rich families could train as scribes. 30
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The Ancient Egyptians often used clay tablets for writing but they also wrote on a type of paper made from a tall, reed-like plant called papyrus. To make the paper, they used two strips from the plant's stem and layered these in opposite directions. Next, they covered the strips with a type of cloth called linen and flattened them with a mallet. After a while the strips would stick together, creating a single sheet to write on. 40

For many years nobody knew what the Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs meant. Then in 1799, a special stone, now known as the Rosetta Stone, was found in Egypt. This was a very significant find because the same message was written on it, in both Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs and in Greek. Archaeologists were able to read the Greek message on the stone and used this to translate the hieroglyphs. They were then able to use this translation to work out the meaning of other Ancient Egyptian texts. 45

Glossary

¹wedge: triangle

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