

Ancient World Writing Systems

INTRODUCTION

For millennia, human beings have communicated through writing. The earliest forms of written communication date back to 25,000-30,000 BC when humans used symbols and images to represent ideas and events in cave paintings and pictographs. Symbolic communication eventually turned into language-based communication, and materials such as clay tablets and papyrus were developed for recording daily communications. Since then, writing has continued to evolve in interesting ways. This lesson uses examples of ancient writing systems to help students understand the history of written communication within a global context. Students will also compare and contrast ancient writing systems with current digital writing technologies.

GRADES 5-6 MATERIALS

- » Primary Source Documents: Cuneiform Tablet and Papyrus Fragment.
- » Investigative Worksheet.
- » Venn Diagram Worksheet.

STANDARDS

NY State Standard 2: World History

Students will use a variety of intellectual skills to demonstrate their understanding of major ideas, eras, themes, developments, and turning points in world history and examine the broad sweep of history from a variety of perspectives.

Common Core: CC6-8RH/SS2

Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.

AASL Standards for the 21st Century Learner: 2.1.1

Continue an inquiry-based research process by applying critical thinking skills (analysis, synthesis, evaluation, organization) to information and knowledge in order to construct new understandings, draw conclusions, and create new knowledge.

AASL Standards for the 21st Century Learner: 2.1.3

Use strategies to draw conclusions from information and apply knowledge to curricular areas, real world situations, and further investigations.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Using primary sources related to ancient world writing systems, students will:

- » Learn about primary sources, what they are and how to interpret them in order to understand the past.
- » Expand their thinking and knowledge about the history of language-based writing.
- » Construct new understandings of languages and writing systems used today.

ASSESSMENT

Assessment should be largely based on the student's completion of the Investigative Worksheet and the Venn Diagram Worksheet, which should demonstrate their ability to:

- » Decipher primary source documents.
- » Organize their thoughts and observations.
- » Compare and contrast two similar ideas and/or objects.

Working in groups, the students should take what they have observed and learned during the lesson about ancient world writing systems and complete the Investigative Worksheet and the Venn Diagram Worksheet. Students should think critically about the similarities and differences between ancient and current writing systems.

GETTING STARTED

- » Explain that primary sources are original documents that tell us about the historical moments in which they were created. Ask the following questions: How can you tell that you are looking, touching, or listening to a primary source? What is a secondary source? Explain that secondary sources are interpretations of primary sources.
- » Introduce the skill of the lesson. In this lesson students will use primary sources to help understand the ways in which early civilizations communicated. Students will also learn about the environment in which the ancient civilizations lived and the reasons for the development of language-based written expression. Students will then be asked to think critically about the similarities and difference between ancient and current writing systems.

DIRECT INSTRUCTION

1. Show the class the cuneiform tablet and the papyrus fragment. If desired, provide students with individual copies of the materials.
2. Direct students to fill out the Investigative Worksheet individually by examining the documents. They will use this worksheet to record observations and make interpretations about size, shape, color, markings, and readability for both examples of ancient writing.
3. After the students have individually completed the worksheet ask the class: What types of materials were these forms of communication written on? What were they written with? What other types of materials do you think early civilizations used for writing? Why? Why do you think early writing systems were created? What do you think people were writing down thousands of years ago? Explain that the cuneiform tablet and the papyrus fragment are examples of ancient writing systems, and provide contextual information for each. (See Teacher's Notes for more information).

4. Ask the students to reflect on these ancient forms. Ask: Did every civilization use the same symbols or alphabet? How do we know this? How many languages are there in the world today? Do they all use the same alphabet? What materials do people use to communicate with today?
5. Break the class into small groups and have the students work together to fill out the Venn Diagram Worksheet to compare and contrast ancient writing systems with forms of writing used today including cursive handwriting, texting, blogs, Twitter, and so on.

TEACHER'S NOTES

1. The cuneiform was one of the earliest forms used to record writing. It was thought to be developed in Mesopotamia, modern day Iran, in the fourth millennium BC. “Cuneiform” literally means wedge shaped, from the Latin root *cuneus* “wedge” and “forma” shape. The Sumerian language dominated the cuneiform system; however, it was adapted to encompass several languages. The cuneiform tablet included with this lesson plan is Sumerian, the image shows multiple views of one clay tablet. Cuneiform tables are categorized by their wedge shaped marks, made from a stylus on wet clay. It is generally understood that the tablets were used to record economic and administrative details.
2. The use of papyrus to communicate goes as far back as the fourth millennium; it is believed to have been first used about a century after cuneiform. Papyrus was manufactured in Africa (where Egypt and Southern Sudan are located today) and comes from the *cyperus papyrus* plant. The process of producing a paper-like scroll was much more difficult than making a clay tablet. The inner pith of several papyrus plants were dissected and laid out overlapping each other. They were then soaked in water and crushed together to make a single sheet. Finally the sheet was dried and polished to create a suitable writing surface. Papyrus was very stable in dry environments such as Egypt. The papyrus fragment found from the Syracuse University Libraries’ Special Collections Research Center records payments made for wheat.
3. Writing has changed dramatically over the past four thousand years. Many different languages and types of writing have emerged all across the world. There are 7,105 known living languages in the world today. English is just one of hundreds of languages currently spoken in the United States. In addition to the creation of hundreds of languages, the methods used for communication have also evolved. Paper-based documents were the primary means of communication to the twentieth century. This included both printed and handwritten forms. However, with the rise of digital technologies such as computers and cell phones, the predominant means of communication shifted. Today’s writing systems are affected by the digital technologies that are used to create them—from the emoticons used in emails to the abbreviations used in texting.

REFLECTION AND SHARING

- » Have each group share their findings from the Venn Diagram Worksheet with the class.
- » Ask the students to share one unique fact they learned during the lesson about primary sources or ancient writing systems before the end of the class period.
- » Ask the students if they know any other languages or alphabets and if they could write them on the board.

PRIMARY SOURCE INVESTIGATIVE WORKSHEET

Use the following, “What Do You See, What Does This Mean, Let’s Dig Deeper” strategy to unwrap primary sources on communication during ancient civilizations



What Do You SEE

Look closely at each item, write down any information that you may find interesting. Try to describe every detail about the item that you notice. Example: The cuneiform tablet is shaped like a square.



What Does This Mean

Use your answers from the “What do you see” box to help reflect on the meaning of your observations. Example: Why is the cuneiform tablet shaped like a square instead of a circle? Because a square has flat sides on which to write.



Let’s Dig Deeper

What are you curious about in the photo? What do you want to know more about? Example: What did they use to write with on the cuneiform tablet?

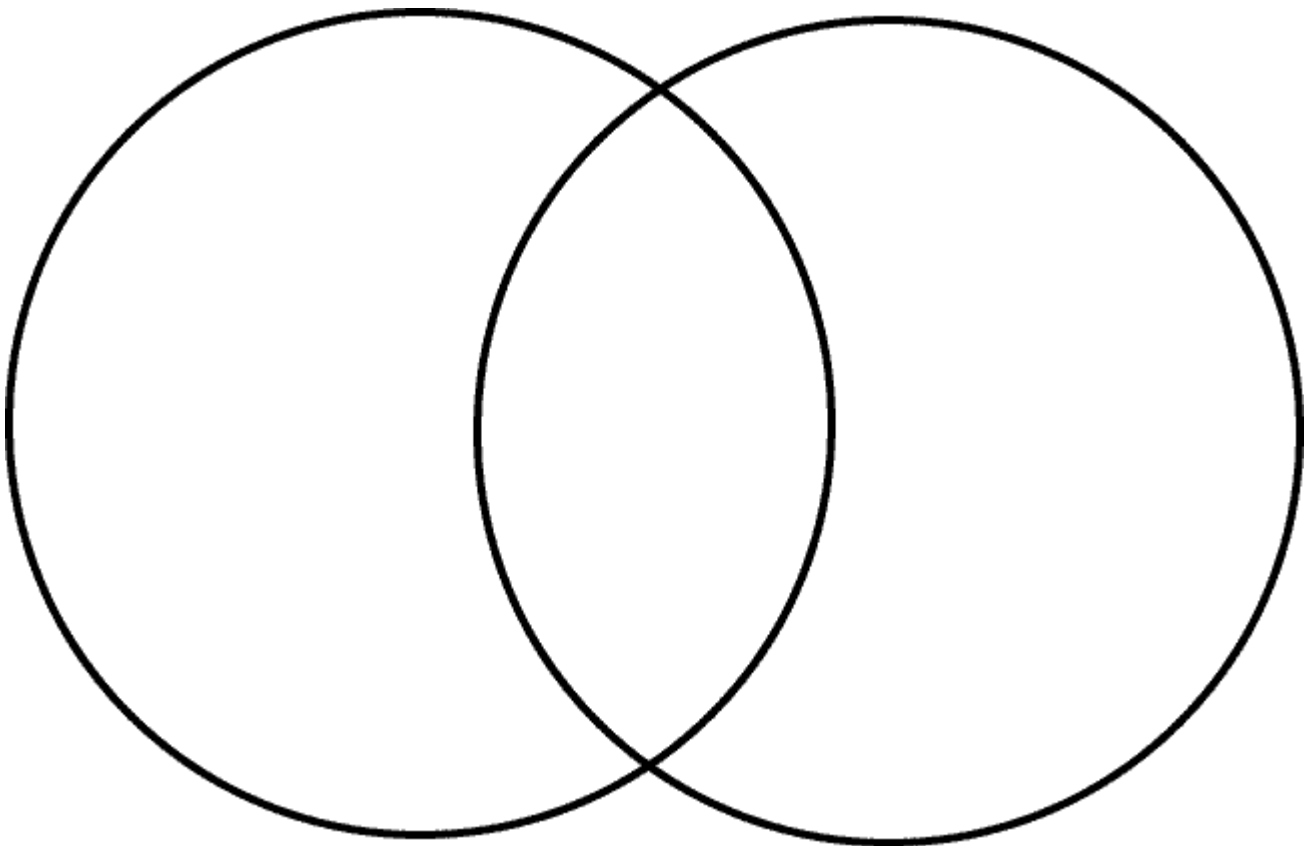
PRIMARY SOURCE INVESTIGATION: VENN DIAGRAM WORKSHEET

Let's take what you have learned about the cuneiform tablet and the papyrus fragment and use that information to examine the writing systems we use today. Use the Venn Diagram to record your answers.

Ancient Writing Systems
(Cuneiform tablet or Papyrus fragment)

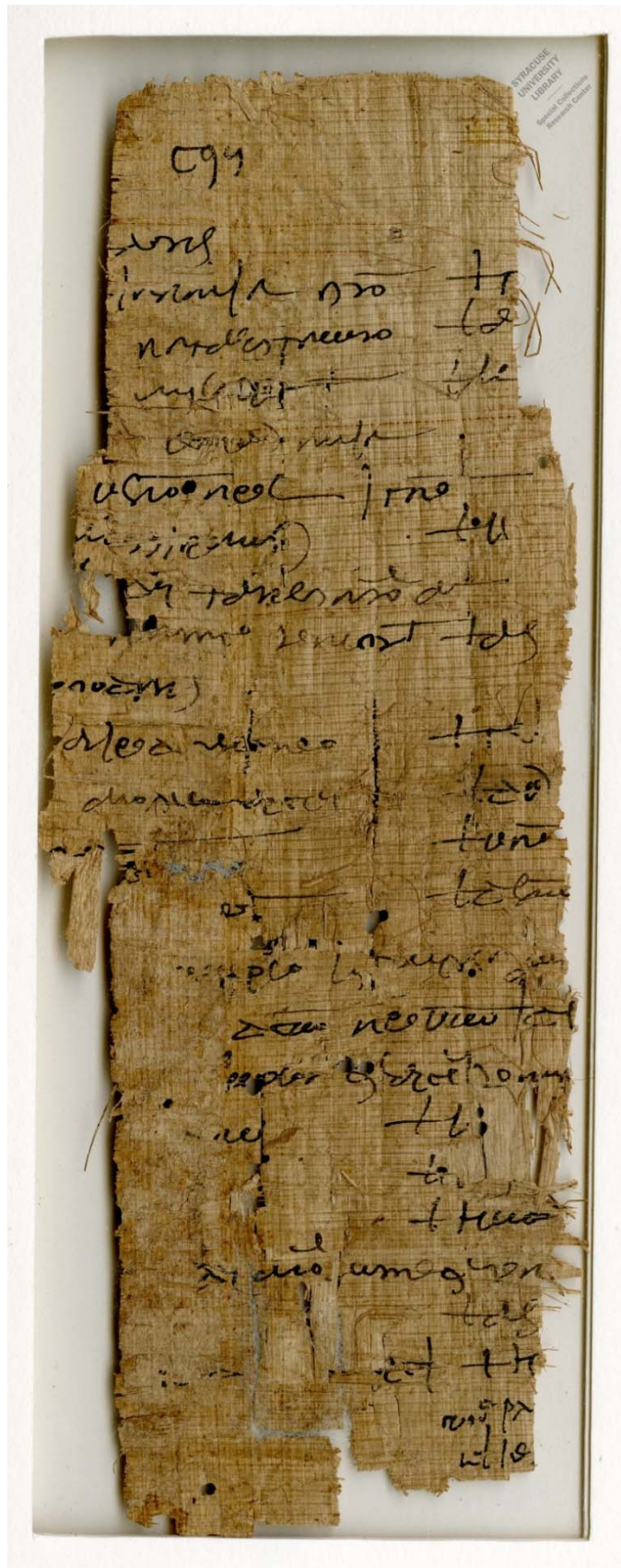
Current Forms of Writing

Similarities





Sumerian Cuneiform, c. 2100-2000 BC. SUL 018, Cuneiform Digital Library Initiative, Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Libraries.



Papyrus Fragment Describing Payments Made in Wheat, sheet 298 of a tax roll, c. 200 A.D., verso.
Special Collections Research Center, Syracuse University Libraries.