

Who invented writing?

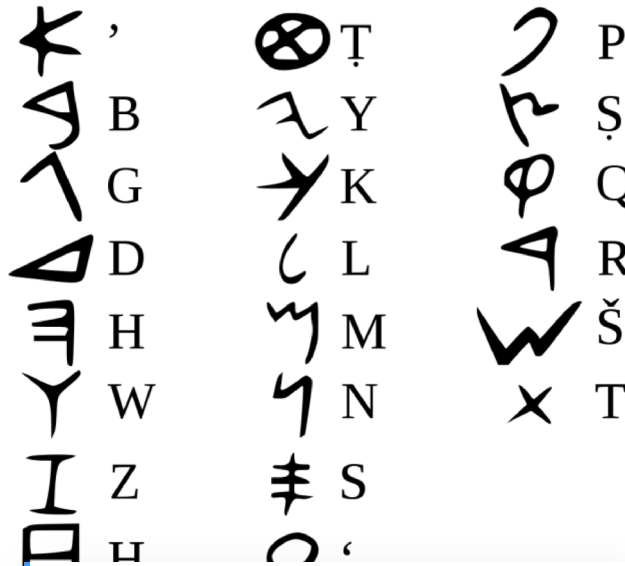
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By [David P. Williams](#) | [August 4, 2020](#) | [Literature](#)

become near universal with the [global literacy rate around 85 percent](#). Even the minority who remain illiterate are likely to be aware of the existence of written language (and their exclusion from its benefits). Mass literacy is a relatively recent phenomenon in the history of humanity and dates from the 19th century, with [literacy rates steadily increasing over the past 200 years](#). Before then, literacy was restricted to a tiny elite in those societies where literacy existed and there were many societies that were not familiar with written language at all.

Can you imagine living in a society that does not have any writing? Why and how would anyone in such a society invent writing?



The Phoenician abjad – the ancestor of almost all scripts in use today (Image credit: Wikipedia)

Today, literacy has

Inventing writing by imitation

Most writing systems that have been invented through the ages took inspiration from another writing system: the Latin alphabet was inspired by the Greek alphabet; the Greek alphabet was inspired by the Phoenician abjad; the Phoenician abjad was inspired by Egyptian hieroglyphs. In another line of transmission, the Phoenician abjad (which, with the exception of the Chinese script, is the ancestor of all writing systems in use today) also inspired the Old Hebrew script (ca. 1000 BCE), which inspired the Aramaic script, which inspired the Syriac script (ca. 500 CE), which inspired the Sogdian script, which inspired the Uighur script (ca. 800 CE), which inspired the Mongolian script (1200 CE).

The details of most of these relationships of inspiration and imitation are lost in history and must be credited to anonymous traders, missionaries, or soldiers. Individual inventors of a writing system are rare exceptions, such as [King Sejong, who invented the Korean script](#). King Sejong took inspiration from the Chinese script.

Creating a new writing system for a language by drawing on an existing model from another language, as King Sejong did for Korean, is undoubtedly an enormous achievement. However, it pales in comparison to the achievement of those inventors who created writing from scratch, at a time when writing did not exist anywhere else in their known world.

Why was writing invented?



Proto-Cuneiform tablet, ca. 3000 BCE (Image credit: Metmuseum)

Living in a highly literate society, it is tempting to imagine that those first inventors wanted to write down stories and transmit them to posterity. Unfortunately, you'd be mistaken. The transmission of stories worked really well orally. Our ancestors had much better memories than we have ([and how literacy has affected our brains is another story](#)), as is evidenced from the great epics or the extensive Aboriginal Dreamtime stories that were transmitted orally over thousands of years.

This means that in a preliterate society no one had any need to write down the

knowledge that was encoded in stories, myths, legends, or genealogies. And we can be sure that no one just thought one day, "Hey, wouldn't it be cool if we could write down spoken language?"

Writing is a technology that emerged together with urbanization. The first city states constituted a new form of social organization that created specific problems of record keeping: how to account for the surplus created by

agriculture and trade, and the activities it resulted in. As humans founded city states and empires, practical problems such as these arose: How much arable land is there? How many heads of cattle can be kept on a particular plot of land? How much tax should be extracted from a farming household of a particular composition? How can we be sure that Farmer So-and-so has already paid his taxes and does not just say they paid? How many slaves need to be captured to build a new temple? How many soldiers need to be kept in the army to protect the city, and how much provisions and equipment will they need to invade the next city down the river and incorporate it into one's kingdom?

Not necessarily pretty questions that inspired writing invention! Writing was not invented for some lofty intellectual pursuits but as a [technology of power](#). Writing was invented as a means of record keeping. It is an information technology that emerged in the domains of state administration and bureaucracy, trade and commerce, and religion.

Early writing had little to do with language and everything to do with keeping a quantitative record of something. Think of it this way: our writing-inventing ancestors needed spreadsheets. It was only over time that these "spreadsheets" became writing: a visual form of language associated with a particular spoken language.

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In fact, not all "spreadsheet systems" became fully-fledged writing systems. So, who invented writing? The answer you're probably familiar with is: the Sumerians of ancient Mesopotamia. That's true but it's not the whole story because writing was invented multiple times, in response to social developments similar to those I outlined above.

To the best of our knowledge, writing was invented independently at least three times: [Sumerian cuneiform](#) in Mesopotamia (ca. 3400 BCE), [Chinese characters](#) in China (ca. 1200 BCE) and [Mayan glyphs](#) in Mesoamerica (ca. 300 BCE). Of these, only the Chinese script is an unbroken living tradition.

I'm saying "at least three times" because it may well have been more often. Our knowledge is limited in three ways.

First, the archeological record is incomplete and only the most durable early writing (pressed in clay or chiseled in stone) has survived while the record for less durable materials (drawn on paper, velum or bark in natural colors, scratched in bone) has disintegrated and only accidental fragments may or may not have survived.



Mayan glyphs (Image credit: Ancient History Encyclopedia)

Second, the relationship between different writing systems is unclear. For instance, there is debate whether [Egyptian hieroglyphs](#) (the earliest of which date back to ca. 3250 BCE) constitute an independent invention or were inspired by Sumerian cuneiform. Similar uncertainties exist related to the [Indus Valley script](#) (ca. 2600 BCE) or [Linear B](#) from the island of Crete in Greece (ca. 1450 BCE).

Third, the history of writing has largely been written by Europeans and is embedded in colonial epistemologies. This limits our knowledge in various ways.

These limitations are well illustrated by our scant knowledge of [Mayan writing](#). To begin with very little research efforts are dedicated to that striking writing system, which only survives in a small number of stone inscriptions and four book manuscripts. This small number is not only due to natural degradation but is the [result of active destruction by the Spanish colonizers](#). "We burned them all", as [Bishop Diego de Landa reported in 1566](#). Not only the products of Mayan writing were destroyed but transmission was suppressed and eventually knowledge of Mayan writing disappeared.

Deciphering ancient scripts became a European passion in the 18th and 19th century. The [French scholar Jean-François Champollion deciphered Egyptian hieroglyphs in 1822](#) and the [German scholars Karsten Niebuhr and Georg Friedrich Grotefend deciphered Sumerian cuneiform in 1837](#). These developments created a lot of excitement and working on ancient documents became all the rage in certain academic circles. However, interest in Mayan glyphs remained limited. Partly this was due to the fact that documents written in that script were far less accessible to European scholars than Middle Eastern documents. But it was also due to the fact that – in yet another colonial way of seeing – they thought the glyphs weren't really a script and just some non-linguistic code. [Mayan glyphs were only deciphered in the late 20th century by US scholar David Stuart, drawing on work by Russian scholars Yuri Knorosov and Tatiana Proskouriakoff.](#)

In the end, not even a topic as seemingly straightforward as the invention of writing has a single story.

Want to learn more?

If you want to find out how our clever ancestors turned their "spreadsheet proto-writing" into visual language, head over to Youtube to listen to my lecture about "[The invention of writing](#)" (36:23 mins)

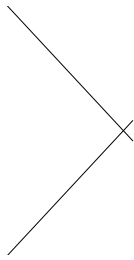
If you don't have that kind of time, "[The invention of writing](#)" also exists as a [Twitter thread](#).

Although the content of these three versions is largely the same and although all three versions have the same author, myself, the "story" changes even within these narrow parameters of identical topic and author. Can you spot the differences? How does content and presentation change across the written, spoken, and digital formats? And, with it, how does your learning experience and response change? What are the affordances and limitations of each medium?

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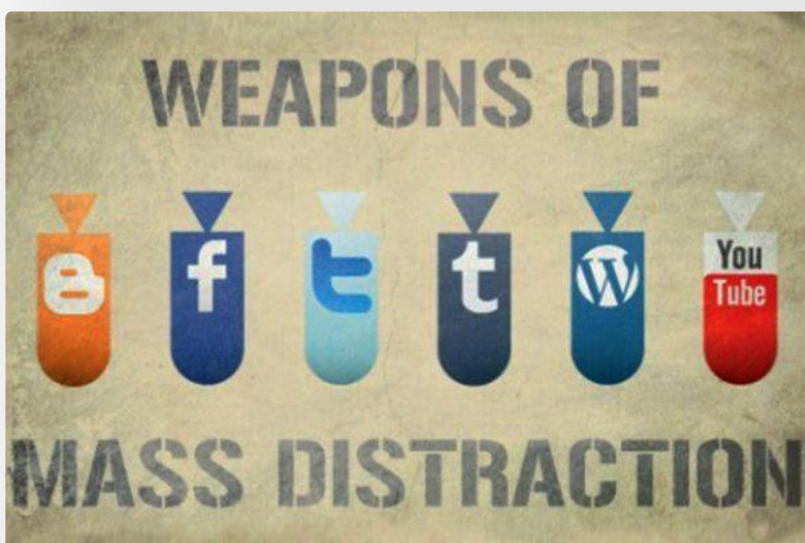


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Author

Ingrid Piller

Dr Ingrid Piller, FAHA, is Distinguished Professor of Applied Linguistics at Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia. Her research expertise is in bilingual education, intercultural communication, language learning, and multilingualism in the context of migration and globalization.