

Inspiration: Before there were books

In this activity sheet students will:

- learn about the earliest forms of writing like cuneiform
- use the Zoom & Pan interactive link to look at the State Library of Victoria's cuneiform tablet in detail
- explore and reflect on the design and use of cuneiform through creative writing
- become familiar with terminology related to pre-book technologies
- draw their own cuneiform design
- evaluate how and why various technologies have succeeded each other, including papyrus, parchment and scrolls; become more familiar with cuneiform by using a Sumerian font on the computer.

Answers to Question time 1

1. Over 4000 years old
2. Iraq
3. 10th month of the 46th year of Shulgi
4. 10th month

Answers to Question time 2

1. Students' opinions. Instigate a class discussion.
2. The Sumerians didn't have money, but traded in goods, such as livestock.

Answers to Question time 3

1. Students might consider weight, durability, usability and endurance of material over time. Papyrus was a lighter material, so more information could be carried/transported.
2. Students might consider weight, durability, usability and endurance of material over time. Parchment was a more flexible and tougher material. Papyrus was very brittle and fragile.
3. Student's opinion. Instigate a class discussion. Prompt students to consider each of the processes from beginning to end, for example finding, picking, drying and cutting river reeds; as well as digging for clay, forming, writing on, and baking the tablet; students can see an animation on how parchment manuscripts were made:
http://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/pharos/sections/making_art/index_manuscript.html

Each of these processes would have taken days and in the case of manuscripts, months.

Answers to Activity 3– Weighing up the good and the bad

	Positives	Negatives	Something Unique?
Cuneiform tablet	Tough, durable; lasts for thousands of years.	Bulky and heavy material; can't write very much on small tablet.	Some were only a few cm long; written on with river reeds.
Papyrus scroll	Lighter than a tablet, can be rolled into a scroll and can fit more information.	Very fragile and brittle; does not last as long as tablets; scrolls difficult to read.	Sometimes scrolls were up to 40m long.
Parchment scroll	Tough and flexible writing material.	You have to kill an animal; a very long process to make; scrolls difficult to read.	Sometimes you can see hair that has been left on the parchment.
Codex	Easier to read than a scroll – you can easily turn to any page.	It can't contain as much information as the internet!	It was made popular by the first Christians.

Answers to Activity 5 – Which came first?

Cuneiform writing, papyrus, parchment scrolls, codex, manuscript books, printed books, typewriter, computers, internet, blogging.

Further reading

To see a project on Sumer by students at Villanova College, visit:
<http://www.vnc.qld.edu.au/enviro/sumer/2002-b.htm>

Additional class activities - Make your own cuneiform tablet from clay

Students can make their own clay tablet and write what they think is the most valuable thing to pass on to future generations. Ask students: what will people want to know about us in 5000 years? They can write in English, or in their own language of symbols (which can then be translated back to others).

Sources consulted

The following sources were used in the development of these activity sheets. You can recommend these resources to any of your students who are interested in finding out more about Sumerian civilization and early writing.

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<http://www.csu.edu.au/faculty/arts/humss/art317/briefhist.htm>

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