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## Inspiration: Before there were books



*Cuneiform tablet*

In this activity sheet you'll learn about ancient forms of writing. You will also see an example of early writing on the cuneiform tablet, which is featured in the Mirror of the World website.

### In the spotlight

Cuneiform Tablet (Third Dynasty of Ur)  
Southern Mesopotamia  
c2050 BCE

### Words to know

cuneiform, reed, clay tablets

### Names and places

Mesopotamia, Sumerians

### Pages to visit

<http://www.mirroroftheworld.com.au/>

[http://www.mirroroftheworld.com.au/inspiration/before\\_the\\_book/php](http://www.mirroroftheworld.com.au/inspiration/before_the_book/php)

[http://www.mirroroftheworld.com.au/inspiration/before\\_the\\_book/cuneiform.php](http://www.mirroroftheworld.com.au/inspiration/before_the_book/cuneiform.php)

<http://www.mirroroftheworld.com.au/timeline.php>

## A world without paper

Imagine a world without paper, books, printers or computers.

Thousands of years before people had invented paper and books, they wrote on many different things including clay, leaves, animal skins and even bones!

The ancient **Sumerians** who lived in **Mesopotamia** invented the world's first writing system over 5000 years ago. Mesopotamia is where Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey are now. The Sumerians didn't write the alphabet – they wrote in **cuneiform**. A cuneiform is an ancient form of writing or 'script', first used in Mesopotamia. Instead of using pens and paper, cuneiform was written by pressing a sharp river **reed** into soft clay. This made wedge-shapes in the clay (cuneiform means 'wedge-shape'). The clay was then baked in an oven or left to dry in the sun. They were baked hard enough to last thousands of years.

### Question time 1

1. What did Sumerians use river reeds for?

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2. What does cuneiform mean?

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**Activity 1 - Get interactive!**

Now go to the Before the Book section of the Mirror of the World website  
[http://www.mirroroftheworld.com.au/inspiration/before\\_the\\_book/cuneiform.php](http://www.mirroroftheworld.com.au/inspiration/before_the_book/cuneiform.php)

You'll notice a link on the left hand side of the screen that says Spin. Follow this link and use the tools to look at every side of the cuneiform tablet.

**The importance of cuneiform tablets**

Cuneiform tablets were a very important invention. Why? Because for the first time, people could write something down instead of having to remember it, and the tablets were easy to carry. Some of them were very small – only a few centimetres long. The tablet featured in this website is a receipt, just like ones you get from the shop!

**Question time 2**

1. Why do you think the tablets are so small?

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2. How long do you think it would have taken to make clay tablets? Would it be a difficult job?

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3. Which do you imagine was easier for writing on – paper or clay? Why?

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4. How old do you think the cuneiform tablet on the website is? Go back to the Cuneiform page or look at the timeline which is a link at the bottom of every page on this website.

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**Activity 2 - Ancient word finder**

Find the following words in the table below. Words may be horizontal, vertical, diagonal or backwards.

Sumer Sumerian Mesopotamia Reed  
 Wedge Clay Tablet Iraq Turkey Iran  
 Oven Invention Bake Cylinder

**Activity 3 - Unscramble the words**

alyc .....  
 aimsuer .....  
 betlab .....  
 finemurco .....

C	S	W	E	P	T	I	M	E	L	O	P	O
V	E	U	T	I	R	A	Q	S	L	M	V	R
S	U	P	M	Q	H	E	L	E	T	E	E	L
I	S	U	M	E	R	I	A	N	N	E	C	R
S	R	E	Q	H	R	E	E	D	P	O	L	S
R	W	A	R	E	D	N	I	L	Y	C	A	A
L	W	E	N	T	D	O	B	B	E	T	Y	M
M	E	S	O	P	O	T	A	M	I	A	O	M
A	D	C	O	J	E	K	G	I	L	B	S	P
N	G	A	L	E	E	P	O	Y	T	L	O	E
A	E	L	Y	E	K	R	U	T	U	E	O	P
I	N	V	E	N	T	I	O	N	P	T	H	T

**Activity 4 - Write like a Sumerian**

Do want to see your name in cuneiform? Go to this website and type in your name!  
<http://www.upennmuseum.com/cuneiform.cgi>

Learn how to write numbers in cuneiform. Go to this website and follow the instructions on the screen.  
<http://it.stlawu.edu/~dmelvill/mesomath/Numbers.html>

