
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, scribe, papyrus, codex, parchment, scroll, vellum

Names and places

Mesopotamia, Sumerians, Ancient Egyptians

Pages to visit

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

http://www.mirroroftheworld.com.au/inspiration/before_the_book/index.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 ago, before we had these inventions, people wrote on many different things including clay, leaves, animal skins and even bones!

The **Sumerians** lived in **Mesopotamia**, which is where parts of Iraq, Iran, Syria and Turkey are today. The Sumerians developed one of the earliest kinds of writing, called **cuneiform**, between 3400BC and 3300BC. 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, which left wedge-shaped impressions ('*cuneus*' is Latin for 'wedge', so 'cuneiform' means 'wedge-shape'). The clay tablets were then baked in an oven, or left to dry in the sun.

Activity 1- Get interactive!

Visit the Mirror of the World website and look for the cuneiform tablet in the section called Before the Book.
http://www.mirroroftheworld.com.au/inspiration/before_the_book/cuneiform.php

Read the information about the tablet and take some notes about where and when it was made. Look at the detail of the tablet by following the Zoom & Pan link on the left-hand side of the page.

Question time 1

1. How old is the tablet that's featured on the Mirror of the World website?

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2. This tablet was found near the city of Baghdad. Which country is this city in?

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3. What is written on the tablet?

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4. The Sumer culture had different months and years to ours. In which Sumerian month was the tablet made?

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The first writing materials

Some cuneiform tablets were very small – the tablet featured in the Mirror of the World website is only a few centimetres long. Their tiny size meant that written information could be carried very quickly across long distances. It was the email of its day.

Only very wealthy and powerful people in Sumer could read and write. So slaves and less wealthy people did not own tablets. The **scribes**, who wrote on the tablets, were very high in the social hierarchy. Many of the tablets were business records. The tablet featured in this website is a receipt, just like the ones you get from the shop. Other tablets were letters telling of soldiers who had died in battle.

Question time 2

1. What do you think motivated people to invent writing in the first place?

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2. What does this tablet tell us about the way Sumerians bought and sold things? Did they use money?

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From clay to plants

Ancient Egyptians used **papyrus** to write on. The papyrus plant is a tall water reed. It was collected, cut into strips, soaked in water, beaten together with a mallet and then dried. Papyrus sheets were often glued together and rolled into lightweight **scrolls** – sometimes up to 40 metres long! They were certainly lighter than clay, but also very fragile.

From plants to skin

Later, around the 2nd century BCE, people began to write on **parchment**, which was also made into scrolls. Parchment was made from the skin of animals, usually cows, sheep or goats. It became more popular than papyrus and eventually replaced it, because it was a tougher and more flexible writing material. **Vellum**, the skin of baby animals, was an even better quality material for the same reasons. To make parchment the skin of the animal is stretched, scraped and then dried. You can sometimes still see animal hair that has been left on the parchment.

Activity 2 - Get interactive!

To see some examples of vellum up close, have a look at *De Musica*, *Antiphonarium* and the *Book of Hours* which you'll find in the Manuscripts section of the Mirror of the World website. Read about how and why these manuscripts were created, and who worked on them.

<http://www.mirroroftheworld.com.au/inspiration/manuscripts/index.php>

You'll notice that on the left-hand side of the manuscripts pages are Zoom & Pan and Gallery of Images links. Follow these links to zoom right in and have a close look at the manuscripts. Notice the texture of the vellum. Look at the fine details and colours. Think for a moment about all the effort, time and craftsmanship that went into their production.

The first real 'book'

From about the 1st century CE the **codex** began to replace the scroll. A codex was first made from sheets of papyrus or parchment, joined together by stitching, and protected by a hard cover. The codex was easy to read with one hand, and could be easily opened to any page, unlike a scroll which had to be unrolled as one piece.

Question time 3

1. Why do you think papyrus might have been a better writing material than clay tablets?

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2. Why do you think parchment might have been better to use than papyrus?

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3. How long do you imagine it would have taken to make:

- a) Clay tablets
b) Papyrus
c) Parchment

Activity 3 – Weighing up the good and the bad

Write down some of the advantages and disadvantages of the writing materials listed in this table.

	Positives +	Negatives -	What's unique?
Cuneiform tablet			
Papyrus scroll			
Parchment scroll			
Codex			

Activity 4 – Write your own cuneiform

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 too:

<http://it.stlawu.edu/~dmelvill/mesomath/Numbers.html>

Activity 5 – Which came first?

Rewrite these inventions in the order that you think they were invented.
Think carefully about which invention needs the other one before it.
<http://www.mirroroftheworld.com.au/timeline.php>

hand-written (manuscript) books	codex	papyrus	
computers	internet	printed books	parchment scrolls
codex	typewriter	cuneiform writing	blogging

Activity 6 – Fontastic fun

If you would like write in Sumerian font on your computer, go to the website below and download the free font.
<http://www.peust.de/sumerian.html>

You can also look at the 'Read Me' file which explains what the cuneiform means.

Did you know?

The first ever writer in history, whose name and writing we know, was a woman. Enheduanna was born around 2300 BCE in Mesopotamia. She was high priestess of the moon and she wrote poems to Inanna (the goddess of love and war) on cuneiform tablets.

Activity 7 – Write like a Sumerian

1. Imagine that you are a very busy and wealthy Sumerian farmer – what you would write on your clay receipt?
2. Write your own poem to Inanna, the goddess of love and war, like the ancient poet Enheduanna. What will you ask from Inanna – help with family, the weather, your country's army, your farm...love?

To learn more about the culture of Sumer, look at this website made by students for students:
<http://www.vnc.qld.edu.au/enviro/sumer/2001.htm>