

A background image showing a collection of light-colored Scrabble tiles with black letters scattered on a pink surface. The tiles are arranged in a way that they are partially overlapping and scattered across the frame. The letters visible include N, D, I, J, S, Y, E, W, Z, S, T, H, F, R, I, M, U, and N.

## **The Alphabet's Ancient Origins**



# The Alphabet's Ancient Origins

*Discover how humans invented alphabets thousands of years ago.*



The alphabet is one of the first things kids learn—think back to all the time you’ve spent practicing your ABCs! But have you ever wondered who first came up with the alphabet ... or how they did it?

## Picturing the First Writing

The first thing to know is that there is no “one” alphabet; there are many! Today, a lot of languages around the world use the Roman alphabet. (That’s the one you’re reading right now.) Other languages rely on entirely different alphabets that use different letters and symbols. However, thousands of years ago, none of these alphabets existed.

### DID YOU KNOW?

**Not every language has a written version. Some people around the world developed ways to record information through knotted rope, beaded belts, memorized chants, and more.**

In fact, the earliest kinds of writing did not use an alphabet at all. Instead, people came up with a way to write using something called logograms. Alphabets use characters or letters to represent individual sounds that then make up a language’s words. A logogram, on the other hand, uses symbols to represent words or ideas.





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Egyptian hieroglyphs carved into a stone wall.

About 5,000 years ago, in approximately 3000 BCE, people in ancient Egypt began using a form of writing known as hieroglyphics. Hieroglyphics used symbols, called hieroglyphs, that sometimes represented sounds, and other times represented people, animals, places, and things. Many of the symbols looked like animals, such as birds, or as body parts, like eyes.

Meanwhile, people nearby in Mesopotamia (an ancient region in the Middle East between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers) began recording information using a different system of image-based writing, known as cuneiform. These symbols began as images, and over time turned into small dashes and lines that represented those images. Soon, people in other parts of the world were also creating their own versions of image-based writing.

### *Inventing an Alphabet*

As time passed and logographic writing spread, people began to change, or adapt, it to suit their needs. One place this happened was in western Asia. There, people had been using Egyptian hieroglyphs to write. But as time went on, they started changing the hieroglyphs—and even changing what they stood for. Instead of using the full hieroglyphic symbols, people began to create simplified versions. And instead of using the symbols to represent ideas and things, they used these new versions to stand for simple sounds. Then, when the sounds were put together in different combinations, they created words!



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By about 1000 BCE, these changes had turned into something completely new: one of the world's first alphabets, known as the North Semitic alphabet. In fact, historians and language experts think that most of the world's alphabets come from this one!

### Amazing Alphabets

So, if most alphabets come from the North Semitic alphabet, why doesn't someone who knows the Roman alphabet automatically know how to read, say, the Arabic alphabet? That's because over time, the alphabet spread to many different places. There, people continued to change how they used it. Some people added different symbols—now known as letters—to better suit the sounds of their languages. Other people got rid of symbols they didn't need. They also began to write the letters in new styles and fashions. (Many people also continued to use logograms, which are still used to write languages around the world today, such as Korean and Japanese.)

For example, in some places, the North Semitic alphabet evolved into the Hebrew alphabet. In the Middle East, it changed in ways that would eventually become the Arabic alphabet. And in the Phoenician kingdom in parts of what are now Lebanon and Israel, the alphabet changed into what is now known as the Phoenician alphabet. As Phoenicians traded with other kingdoms, empires, and cultures, those people adopted this new, somewhat simpler style of writing. Soon, the Phoenician alphabet led to the Roman alphabet of ancient Rome, and eventually became used by English speakers around the world.

#### FUN FACT

**The Rotokas alphabet of Papua New Guinea is the shortest in the world, with only 12 letters.**

The alphabets of today may have started in the same place, but grew to look and sound completely different from each other!