

## THE BEGINNING OF CIVILIZATION

### STUDENT SOURCE 5 THE FIRST WRITTEN COMMUNICATION

It is believed that the writing system invented by the Sumerians around 3200 B.C., called Cuneiform, was developed so that temple priests could keep track of goods entering and leaving the temple storehouses. For each item, a different wedge shaped mark was made on a wet clay tablet, to be kept as a permanent record.

As far back as 8,000 B.C., people kept track of the exchange of goods and services. Clay tokens represented each bushel of grain. As people began to domesticate different animals, the tokens began to take on various shapes and sizes to represent

the differences. Tokens were stored in containers. As quantities of food and animals increased, the amount of tokens needed became awkward to accumulate. A change in the system was needed ; soon, instead of carrying a large amount of different tokens, an impression of the tokens was made on one flat piece of clay. Then the people needed only a few clay tablets on which to create their record of goods. Eventually a symbol was created to represent the amount of the specific object. For example, instead of having a clay tablet with thirty impressions of the "sheep token", a uniform symbol for thirty was developed and impressed next to a symbol of the sheep token.

Finally, the symbol for the amount and the symbol for the specific commodity was drawn with a

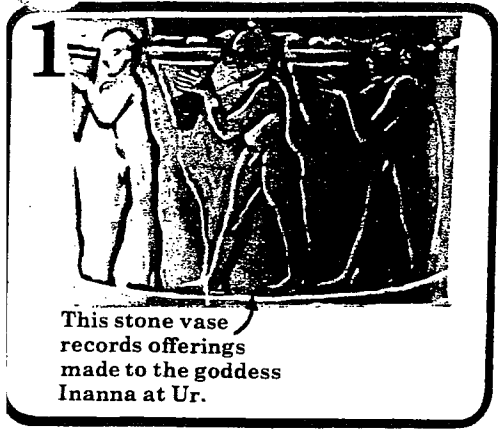
stylus directly onto the clay tablet. These symbols were pictures of the object, or designs to represent the word. This is called pictogram or logogram writing. Such writing worked well when temple storehouses were small, but as the cities grew, the types of objects to be recorded grew in variety and number. New marks continually had to be invented. It soon became necessary for another change in the system of written communication. Eventually, the people of Sumer began to use symbols to represent separate sounds. A name of an object was then represented by a combination of sound symbols. The symbols were

not written sequentially. They were placed, sometimes in no particular order, inside boxes sketched into the clay. Eventually the symbols became sparcer in their line, shape and form. This made the work of the scribe less tedious and time consuming.

Cuneiform has about 600 signs representing objects, and sound syllables, enabling the Sumerians to write entire sentences. Most Sumerian clay tablets that have been found are legal documents such as deeds, receipts, contracts and massive lists of goods services and observable information. The Sumerians though also wrote myths, epics and narrative poetry celebrating the deeds and adventures of the gods and heroes.

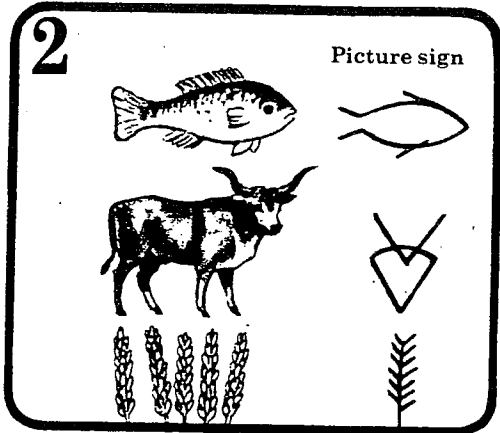
Decipherment of Cuneiform, in the 19th century, was an act of code-breaking, taking years of painstaking work by Sir Henry Rawlinson, a British army officer and scholar.

# The Invention of Writing

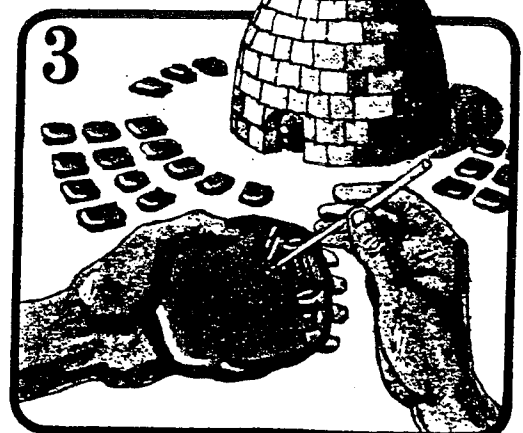


1 This stone vase records offerings made to the goddess Inanna at Ur.

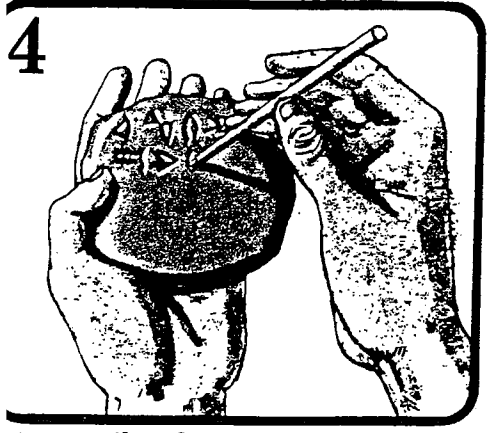
The Sumerian temples collected gifts for the gods and goddesses and also handed out goods as payments. As the Sumerians' wealth grew, a simple system of keeping accounts became necessary.



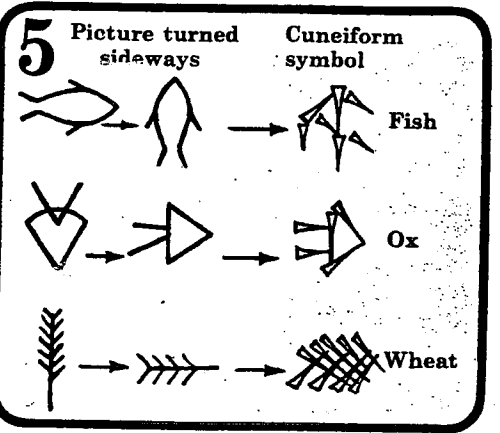
2 They began to draw sketches of the objects they wished to record using a flattened piece of clay and a reed pen. This is the earliest form of writing.



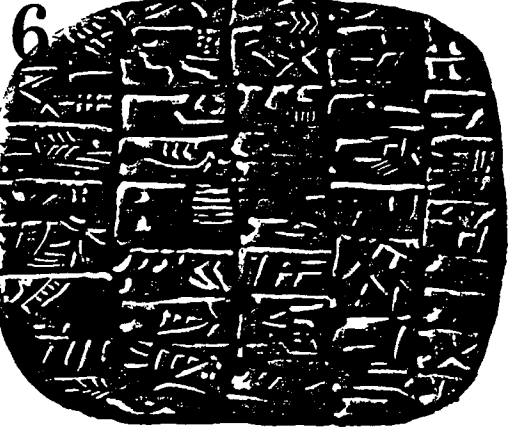
3 At first, the pictures were drawn underneath each other on the wet clay. The clay was then dried in the sun or baked in a kiln to make it into a hard tablet.



4 After, scribes found that it was easier to draw the signs sideways. As time passed, the pictures they drew were less and less like the objects they represented.



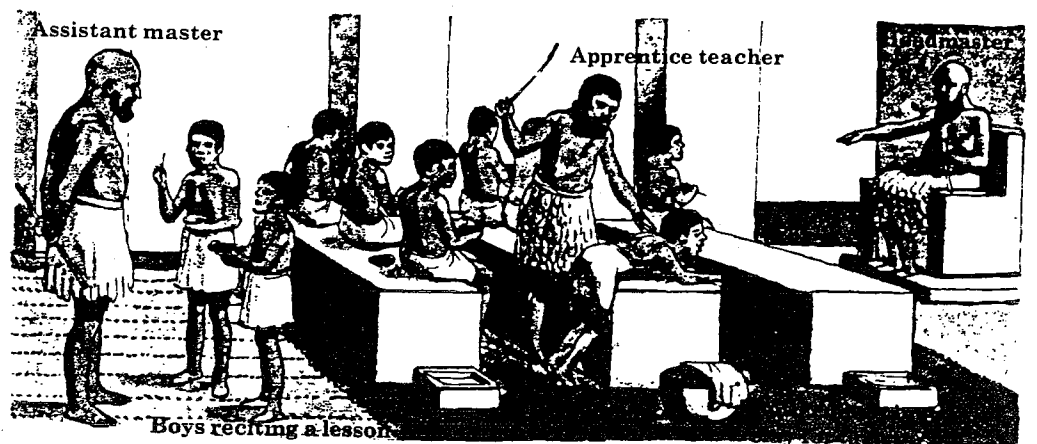
5 Because of the shape of the reed pen, the pictures were turned into wedge-shaped symbols. We call this kind of writing cuneiform, which means "wedge-shaped".



6 By adapting the signs and using them together, other words could be built up. This meant they could write sentences expressing ideas as well as list objects.



Those who could afford to, sent their sons to school. School began very early and lasted until evening. The boys had to take lunch with them and work very hard.



Reading, writing and arithmetic were taught in the schools. Discipline was very strict and boys were beaten for not doing their lessons properly.

One Sumerian story tells of a schoolmaster being bribed. A boy got a good report by persuading his father to give the master presents.

# Cuneiform

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

A	→	N	⇒
B	↖	O	↗
C	∟	P	⊥
D	⊞	Q	∟
E	↓	R	↘
F	↘	S	↗
G	↖	T	∟
H	↖	U	⊞
I	↗	V	↖
J	⊞	W	⇒
K	↘	X	↓
L	⊞	Y	↘
M	↘	Z	⊞

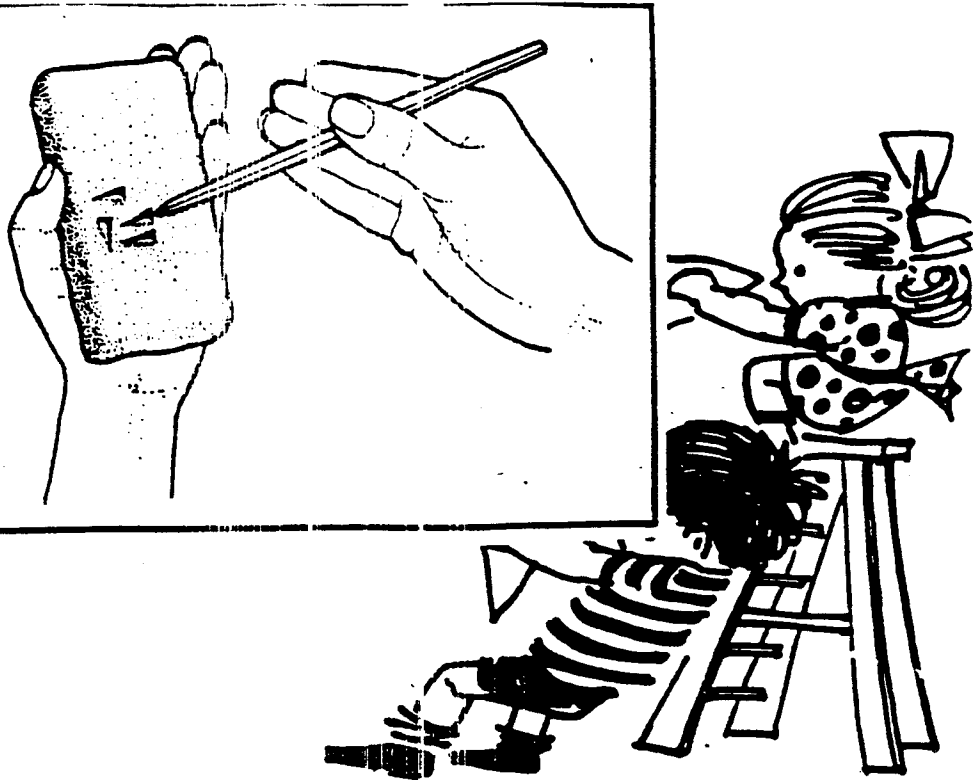
With temple storerooms piled high with cloth, oil, and grain, Sumerians needed a way to keep track of their goods. To solve this problem they made some pictures on clay tablets. Over the years, symbols standing for a sound, word, idea, or group of words took their place.

Their writing system was called cuneiform, meaning "wedge-shaped." Using a stylus to mark on the clay tablets, scribes kept the records of trade. Eventually they moved on to write other things: laws, myths, poems, medical treatments, and mathematical problems.

**Using the cuneiform alphabet try some of your own cuneiform. Be certain to label it!**


...ing. The picture on the right shows how  
...perform writing was done in a lump of clay.

...orm writing, ▽ stood for 1 or 60,  
...ording to its position. ◀ stood for 10,  
◀◀◀▽▽ stood for 60+10+10+10+1+1+1=83.  
...at do these stand for? (a)◀▽▽ (b)▽◀▽  
▽▽◀ (d)▽▽◀◀◀▽(e)▽◀◀◀◀▽. Put the  
...ollowing into cuneiform: (a) 93 (b) 34 (c) 144  
251.



ART TO ZOO—March 1985

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

# How to Write in Cuneiform

Would you like to spend 12 years just learning to write? That's how long writing students called scribes had to study 2,500 years ago in Mesopotamia.

Mesopotamia is the area between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in Asia. The Sumerians who lived there used a writing system called *cuneiform*, which is a Latin word for *wedge-shaped*. Cuneiform was written on damp clay tablets, and the marks the writing stick made on the clay looked like small wedges or triangles.

The writing stick, called a stylus, was made from a reed, which is a plant that grows along rivers. The end of the reed was sharpened into the shape of a triangle.

You can write in cuneiform, too, but it won't take you 12 years, especially if you follow these easy directions.

You'll need air-dry clay (a chunk about the size of a tennis ball), a new and unsharpened pencil, sandpaper, and nail polish.

