



Writing – Humankind’s Greatest Invention

Writing is fun, but it can also be a serious endeavour. 1
Writing can be art or science. Writing is a great way to communicate information and feelings. Writing can inform and entertain. It can incite. It can reassure. It can change people’s lives. It can change the world. And it is something we can all do. Writing is humankind’s greatest invention.

Evidence of man’s earliest attempt to communicate 2
by “writing” things down can be found in caves. Yes, even cavemen wanted to make note of their activities; their 30 000-year-old hunting journals have been found on the walls in caves near Avignon, France.

Egyptian civilization also had their own form of picture art/communication, called hieroglyphs. The ancient Assyrians (in what is now northern Iraq) had a system called cuneiform. The Chinese pictographic system of writing began as early as 1500 BCE. Over time, all of these pictographic systems incorporated phonetic elements as well. The Korean and Japanese “alphabets”, developed later, are phonetic in nature, although today, Japan also incorporates the Chinese system of writing into its language. Other Asian languages, such as Thai, are also phonetic in nature, meaning that the written symbols are based on sounds, not pictures or ideas.

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The western alphabet was first developed in the Middle East, by the Phoenicians, in the area that is now Lebanon and Greece, hence the term “phonetic”. With this phonetic system, we need only a small number of symbols, which can be combined in an unlimited number of ways, to write all the words we need. It is generally agreed that pictograph-based languages, such as Chinese, are harder to master, but not impossible. For example, while there are about 130 000 Chinese characters in existence, the average Chinese person needs to know only about 2000 to be able to read the newspaper.

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Ts’ang Chieh – the Inventor of Chinese Characters

Ts’ang Chieh was credited for inventing Chinese characters. His invention of the Chinese script was actually inspired by the footprints of birds and animals. He noticed that the lines and shapes were perceptible and distinct. Ts’ang Chieh then drew pictures of the objects according to their shapes and forms. In time, these pictures were reduced and simplified to a few lines and highly stylized, and became the early form of Chinese writing.

From cave-wall art to the printing press and the World Wide Web, the expression of ideas through writing – and the dissemination of these ideas – has become accessible to so many people. Through blogs, for example, we can know what people are thinking and feeling about things on the other side of the world! We are truly living in a global village.

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- 1** Which of the following is an example to illustrate that writing can reassure?
- a an article about global warming
 - b a letter of encouragement from the principal
 - c a list of things to do
 - d a recipe
- 2** The Japanese alphabet
- a is phonetic-based.
 - b originated from the Chinese pictographic system of writing.
 - c incorporated phonetic elements.
 - d is different from other Asian languages because it is pictograph-based.
- 3** Egyptian hieroglyphs
- a were discovered in caves near Avignon.
 - b originated in northern Iraq.
 - c shared the same root as cuneiform.
 - d were pictograph-based.
- 4** Which of the following statements is true?
- a The Phoenicians were credited for inventing the western alphabet.
 - b Chinese has a small number of phonetic symbols that can be combined to form an unlimited number of words.
 - c Lebanon and Greece shared the same pictograph-based writing system.
 - d An average Chinese newspaper uses about 2000 characters.