

## The Story of Writing: Scripts, Alphabets, and Calligraphy Fromm Institute Winter 2020

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When you all received your notice about scheduled classes at the Fromm Institute for the Winter semester 2020, it was taken for granted that you could read the communication sent in the form of writing using the Latin or Roman alphabet. Probably you never thought that this ability to write and read is a very recent development in the evolution of humans. Anthropologists estimate that *Homo sapiens* evolved from earlier hominids ~ 1,000,000 to 500,000 years ago. Our use of language to communicate distinguishes *Homo sapiens* from other species. It has been suggested that a gene, *FOXP2*, underwent a mutation allowing humans to speak and that this took place in East Africa ~ 100,000 to 50,000 years ago.

Now if we consider the earliest forms of writing, cuneiform and hieroglyphs, they date back only ~ 5,000 years ago, a mere 1/100 fraction of our existence as *Homo sapiens*, and 1/10 of the time since we were able to speak. The Latin alphabet which we use is derived from Proto-Canaanite, Paleo-Hebrew, Phoenician, Aramaic, and Greek (introduce vowels), is even more recent, about 3500 years before the present. So from an anthropological and historical perspective, writing is a relatively new acquisition. In this course we will trace the beginning of writing in Mesopotamia, Egypt, China and Meso-America and its spread throughout the world. Writing began with accountancy, "as a direct consequence of the compelling demand of an expanding economy." We will learn how the ability to write and read passed from a few select scribes to the masses with that tremendous invention of the **alphabet**; an attempt to represent a single sound of a spoken language by a single letter. Instead of learning thousands or hundreds of signs now one need know only 26 letters and a few punctuation marks and some semantic symbols, for example +/-, \$ and number signs which are called logograms. Without writing there would be no history and no civilization, as we know it. It is a fascinating story, as is the cracking of the codes of long lost cuneiform, hieroglyphs, Mayan glyphs and Linear B. Finally we will consider writing as an art form: calligraphy, printing, the development of cursive writing and we will mourn the death of handwriting in this computer age.

We have an excellent textbook for this course. Andrew Robinson's "*The Story of Writing*", 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition 2007 which is easily understood by lay readers, and has numerous illustrations. (\$25 new or \$10-15 used)

## Further Reading.

Barthel, G. *Konnte Adam schreiben? Weltgeschichte der Schrift.* DuMont Schauberg, Cologne, 1972.

Christin, A-M, editor, *A History of Writing: from hieroglyph to multimedia*, Flammarion, Paris, English language edition 2002.

Clayton, E. *The Golden Thread: The Story of Writing*, Counterpoint, Berkeley, CA. 2013.

David, I. *The Hebrew letter calligraphic variations.* Jason Aronson Inc. Northvale, N.J. 1990

Fischer, S.R. *A History of Writing*, Reaktion Books Ltd. London, 2001.

Houston, S.D. *The First Writing Script Invention as History and Process.* Cambridge University Press, 2004

Ifrah, G. *The Universal History of Numbers.* J. Wiley and Sons, New York. 2000.

Jean, G. *Writing: The story of Alphabets and Scripts*, H.N. Abrams, New York. 1992

Kushner, L. *The Book of Letters.* 2<sup>nd</sup> Edit. Harper & Row, New York. 1990

McCarter, P.K. *Ancient Inscriptions: Voices from the Biblical World.* Washington DC 1996.

Powell, B. *Writing Theory & History of the Technology of Civilization* Wiley-Blackwell 2009

Sass, B. *The genesis of the alphabet and its development in the second millennium BC* Weisbaden, 1989.

Shlain, Leonard. *The Alphabet versus the Goddess.* Viking, New York. 1998.

Course schedule **The Origins of Writing** Winter Semester 2020

- Jan 9 Introduction: from notches, tokens to signs. Writing defined, various systems and classification. Origins.  
(Read Robinson text : pp. 7-48 & pp.58-61)
- Jan 16 Pictography, Evolution of writing from pictograph to cuneiform and its decipherment  
(Read Robinson text : pp. 52-91)
- Jan 23 From Hieroglyphs to Hieratic and Demotic scripts. Linear B signs: their decipherment.  
(Read Robinson text : pp. 92-119 & pp.218-219)
- Jan 30 Meso-American glyphs, undeciphered scripts. Film "Cracking the Maya Code"  
(Read Robinson text : pp. 120-155)
- Feb 6 Chinese characters mostly semantic-phonetic; Japanese writing: Kanji, Hiragana, Katakana; Vietnamese, Korean.  
(Read Robinson text : pp. 182-209)
- Feb 13 Youtube Video: Alphabet The story of writing Parts 1 & 2 by Donald Jackson 58:07 min  
GEN 140-The evolution of writing Jürgen Hanke 8:24 min  
History of the alphabet 21:38 min
- Feb 20 Evolution of alphabets, who was first: Proto-Canaanite, Phoenician, Paleo-Hebrew, Aramaic, Greeks introduce vowels  
(Read Robinson text : pp. 156-173)
- Feb 27 Latin alphabet, later derivative alphabets: Coptic, Brahmi and alphabets derived from it e.g. Devangari, Runic, Arabic, Cyrillic, German Gothic, Cherokee  
(Read Robinson text : pp. 174-181)
- March 5 Writing as art: calligraphy, printing, from the development of cursive writing to mourning the death of handwriting.  
(Read Robinson text : pp. 210-217)

## Glossary

**abjad:** is a type of writing system where each symbol or glyph stands for a consonant, leaving the reader to supply the appropriate vowel (e.g. Arabic & Hebrew).

**abugida:** is a segmental writing system in which consonant–vowel sequences are written as a unit: each unit is based on a consonant letter, and vowel notation is secondary (e.g. Brahmic & Ethiopic scripts).

**acrophony:** the naming of letters of an alphabetic writing system so that a letter's name begins with the letter itself.

**alphabetic writing:** writing in which signs represent elements of speech smaller than syllables, letters predominate.

**Canaanite:** inhabitant the biblical area of ancient Palestine west of the River Jordan

**dextrograde:** written/read from left to right.

**epigraphy** is the study of inscriptions as writing; it is the science of identifying graphemes, clarifying their meanings, classifying their uses according to dates and cultural contexts, and drawing conclusions about the writing and the writers.

**glyph:** a symbol or character that conveys information non verbally.

**grapheme:** a minimal unit of a writing system.

**homophone:** two or more words having the same pronunciation but different meanings, origins, or spelling, for example new and knew, to, too, and two, rose (flower) and rose (past tense of "rise").

**lexigraphy:** writing in which each character represents a word (Greek *lexis*=word)

**logoconsonantal signs:** pictures standing only for the sound of their beginning consonant.

**logogram:** a conventional, abbreviated symbol for a frequently recurring word or phrase, as the symbol **&** for the word and. Also called **logograph**.

**logosyllabic:** a system whose phonetic signs mostly denote syllables.

**morpheme:** smallest meaningful unit of a language (e.g. in, come, -ing for incoming).

**ostrakon:** piece of **pottery**, broken off from a **vase** or earthenware vessel.

**paleography:** is the study of ancient and historical handwriting; including the practice of deciphering, reading, and dating historical manuscripts, and the cultural context of writing.

**Phoenician:** 1. a member of a Semitic people inhabiting ancient Phoenicia 2. the Semitic language of the Phoenicians, written in an alphabet that was the ancestor of the Greek and Roman alphabets.

**phoneme:** small particle of sound that makes a difference in meaning

**phonography:** writing using a sign to which a sound is attached.

**pictogram/pictograph:** writing with pictures, pictorial symbol.

**rebus:** Latin "from things," when the meaning of a sign is dropped and only the sound is preserved, representation by pictures suggesting syllables.

**semasiography:** (from Greek: σημασία (semasia) "signification, meaning" and Greek: γραφία (graphia) "writing") is "writing with signs", a non-phonetic based technique to communicate information without the necessary intercession of forms of speech. It means written symbols and languages that are not based on spoken words. e.g mathematical or musical notation, emoji

**semitic:** of or pertaining to a subdivision of Afro-Asiatic Semitic languages e.g. Arabic, Aramaic, Akkadian, Hebrew, Phoenician, etc. From Hebrew *Shem* name of the eldest son of Noah. The word was coined and first applied to the Semitic **languages** by August Ludwig von Schlözer in 1781.

**shorthand:** an abbreviated symbolic writing method that increases speed and brevity of writing.

**signary:** a system or list of syllabic or alphabetic signs of a language or an ancient script.

**sinistrograde:** written/read from left to right

**stenography:** from the Greek *stenos* (narrow) and *graphein* (to write), the process of writing in shorthand.

**syllabary:** table or listing of syllables, specifically a series or set of written characters each one of which is used to represent a syllable.

**syllabogram:** sign that has phonetic value. The most common is consonant (C) + simple vowel (V) = (CV) but other arrangements occur (VC, CVC).

**symbol:** is a mark, sign or word that indicates, signifies, or is understood as representing an idea, object, or relationship. All communication is achieved through the use of symbols.

**writing:** a system of markings on a material substance with a conventional reference that communicates information.

Other definitions include: a way of recording speech by visible marks.