

## **The Story of Writing: Alphabets and Scripts**

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In this course we will examine how writing, one of the greatest inventions in human history, developed from accountancy (keeping track of commercial transactions) and pictograms to symbols representing phonetic sounds. Among the scripts we will consider are cuneiform, hieroglyphs, Mayan glyphs, undeciphered scripts and the evolution of various alphabets. We will trace the earliest Phoenician letters to Aramaic and Hebrew alphabets and beyond to Greek, Latin, Brahmi, Nordic runes and Arabic script. Later adaptations of Greek and Latin alphabets such as Coptic, Cyrilic and Gothic will be shown. We will also consider Chinese and Japanese writing. Finally we will discuss penmanship, the slow death of cursive writing, the art of calligraphy and the development of printing.

### **Recommended Textbook**

Robinson, Andrew. *The Story of Writing*. Thames and Hudson, London. 1995. (This book costs \$13.57 on Amazon.com)

### **Further Reading.**

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

Coulmas, F. *The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Writing Systems*, Blackwell Publishing, Oxford, 1999.

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

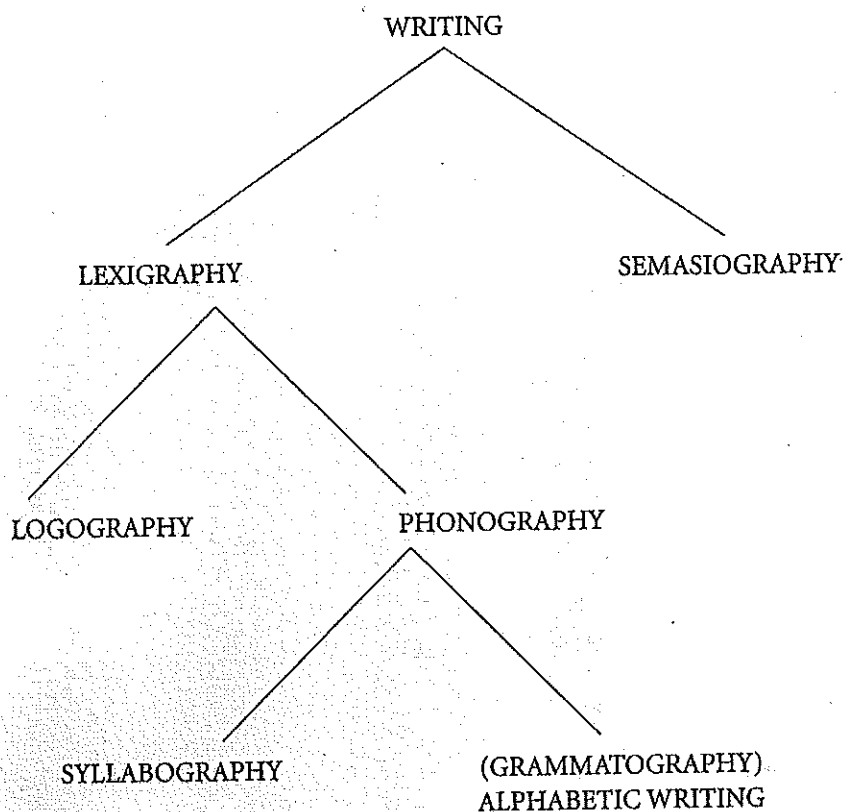
Kipling, R. *How the Alphabet was made in Just so stories*, Doubleday, Garden City, N.Y. 1924.

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

Nakanishi, A. *Writing Systems of the World: Alphabets, Syllabaries, Pictograms*. C.E.Tuttle, Rutland,VT. 1998

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

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



### **Categories of writing**

From Powell, B.B *Writing* Wiley-Blackwell, Malden, MA 2009

## Glossary

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

pictogram/pictograph: Writing with pictures, pictorial symbol

symbol/sign:

Something that stands for something else, regarded by general consent as representing something

rebus:

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

syllabogram:

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

Logogram (also called semantic sign) :

"word sign" refers to a significant segment of speech but does not have phonetic value

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

lexigraphy:

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

semasiography:

writing in which signs are not attached to necessary form of speech

logography:

writing with logograms ("word sign" that have no phonetic value) from Greek = *logos* word + Greek *gramma*= thing written

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

syllabography:

writing in which syllabograms (CV, VC, CVC) predominate

alphabetic writing:

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

## **Course Schedule for The Story of Writing: Alphabets and Scripts**

- Sept 15 Introduction: from notches, tokens to signs. Writing defined, various systems and classification. Origins.  
(Read Robinson text : pp. 7-51)
- Sept 22 Pictography, Evolution of writing from pictograph to cuneiform and its decipherment  
(Read Robinson text : pp. 52-91)
- Sept 29 From Hieroglyphs to Hieratic and Demotic scripts. Linear B signs: their decipherment.  
(Read Robinson text : pp. 92-119)
- Oct 6 Meso-American glyphs, undeciphered scripts. Film "Cracking the Maya Code"  
(Read Robinson text : pp. 120-155)
- Oct 13 Chinese characters, Japanese writing: Kanji, Hiragana, Katakana  
(Read Robinson text : pp. 182-209)
- Oct 20 Evolution of alphabets, who was first: Proto-Canaanite, Phoenicians? Paleo-Hebrew, Aramaic, Greeks introduce vowels  
(Read Robinson text : pp. 156-173)
- Oct 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)
- Nov 3 Writing as art: calligraphy, printing, from the development of cursive writing to mourning the death of handwriting.  
(Read Robinson text : pp. 210-217)