

Support notes for tutors

ESOL workshop: Origins of Writing

Introduction

This workshop takes questions related to the value and purpose of writing to explore some of the earliest examples of cuneiform writing, and gives students the opportunity to create a record of their visit in clay. To make the most of your visit, try to spend some time in class to discuss some of the following and introduce the vocabulary before your visit

Background information

The origins of writing are largely unclear. Writing systems were created independently all over the world. The earliest we know of were developed in the Middle East around 5,000 years ago, but other scripts were invented in India, Egypt, China and Central America.

These forms of writing look completely different, follow different rules and are often read in completely different ways, but they all perform the same basic function. They are all a visual means of recording language.

Literacy

Until the advent of mass education in the Western world in the nineteenth century, most people could not read or write. Writing in most ancient civilisations was restricted to a fairly small and powerful elite. It was a useful tool in the creation of empires and kingdoms through administration and record-keeping.

The power of writing

This great skill was used to record payments of taxes and tributes to kings and rulers, and to keep track of the numbers of tax-payers in censuses. It was used to record commercial contracts and transactions between individuals, of goods and services bought and sold, and of the cost involved. Some of the earliest written texts from Mesopotamia and Egypt are of this kind. Cuneiform tablets from ancient southern Iraq, for example, record the allocation of rations to workers. Therefore, writing has been a means of organisation and keeping wealth and power.

Before your visit - vocabulary and preparation

Use Explore, an online database of 5000 objects from the Museum's collection to find images of cuneiform (type in the keyword 'cuneiform').

Look at the vocabulary below and use the following activities to help your students prepare for their visit.

script	alphabet	pen	stylus	
reed	paper	clay	slate	
handwriting	letters	copy	shape	practice
note	message	text	email	list
directions	number	address	letter	
invoice	receipt	record		
proof	evidence	understanding	decipher	

Discuss the following

- What are the differences in format between the different languages the students can write?
- How do children learn to write in the UK and other countries? What materials do they use?
- How important is writing in everyday life?
- Writing versus memory – which will win? Why?
- “It's there in black and white”. What can we prove from written records?