

Reading

Origins of Writing

Ancient **civilizations** **attributed** the origins of writing to the gods. For the ancient Egyptians, their god Thoth was the **creator** of writing and, in some stories, also the creator of speech. The ancient Sumerians and Assyrians also believed that writing originated with certain gods, as did the ancient Maya. In Chinese **mythology**, the creation of writing is **attributed** to an ancient sage and was used for communication with the gods. Clearly, writing was highly valued even by ancient peoples.

Humans began painting pictures on cave walls 25,000 years ago or more, but writing systems did not develop until groups of people began **settling** in farming communities. Scholars say that writing systems developed independently in at least three different parts of the world: Mesopotamia, China, and Mesoamerica.

The oldest known writing system developed among the ancient Sumerians in Mesopotamia around 3000 B.C. Along with the rise of agricultural societies came the development of **property** ownership and the need to keep records of it. In early **agricultural** societies, **property** consisted largely of land, livestock such as cattle, and grain. Originally, clay tokens of various shapes were used to count these possessions. From this developed a system of impressing the shapes onto clay **tablets**. One of the earliest clay **tablets** of this type was found in **excavations** in Mesopotamia and dates from the time of the Sumerian culture. Scribes then began using reeds instead of **tokens** to mark the clay, developing a system of wedge-like shapes to represent the tokens. This system of writing using wedge shapes is known as cuneiform. It was later **adopted** by other cultures and became the basis for other writing systems. Originating in a system that used pictures to represent objects, cuneiform writing eventually developed into systems that used symbols to represent the sounds of language.

The oldest form of Chinese writing dates from around 1500 B.C. It is called oracle bone script because it was **carved** on animal bones and shells that were used for predicting the future. At a later period, Chinese writing appeared on bronze vases and later still developed into a system that was used to record government affairs. The Chinese writing system was also the original basis for both the Japanese and Korean writing systems.

In Mesoamerica, a region that **encompasses** parts of Mexico and Central America, it is the ancient Mayans who are famous for the writing they **inscribed** on temple walls and other religious **structures**. However, **scholars** believe that writing in that part of the world may have begun

before the rise of the Mayan **civilization**. The Zapotec culture, centered¹ on Oaxaca, Mexico, was already using writing around 400 B.C., or possibly earlier. The Olmec culture may have developed a writing system even earlier than that. Recent discoveries show that the Mayans may have begun writing around 2,300 years ago. They used a system of symbols that represented words and syllables to record information about the **deeds** of their rulers as well as information connected to their calendar and astronomy. Their system of writing survived until the time of the Spanish Conquest in the 1500s.

In ancient times, only **specialized**² people such as **scholars**, priests, or government officials used writing. Today, close to three-quarters of the world's adult population can read and write, and **literacy** is considered a basic skill necessary to **function** in the modern world.

Answer the questions about **Origins of Writing**.

Questions 1-7

Do the following describe the ancient Sumerians, the ancient Chinese, or the ancient Maya?

*Write the correct letter, **A**, **B**, or **C**.*

- A** Ancient Sumerians
- B** Ancient Chinese
- C** Ancient Maya

- _____ 1. inscribed symbols on bones
- _____ 2. inscribed symbols on religious structures
- _____ 3. inscribed symbols on clay tablets
- _____ 4. used tokens to keep records of their property
- _____ 5. used writing to record the deeds of their rulers
- _____ 6. developed a writing system that was adopted by the Japanese
- _____ 7. settled in Mesopotamia

¹BrE: centred

²BrE: specialised

ESSENTIAL WORDS FOR THE IELTS

Questions 8–10

Do the following statements agree with the information in the reading passage?

Write

TRUE if the statement agrees with the information.
FALSE if the statement contradicts the information.
NOT GIVEN if there is no information on this in the passage.

- _____ 8. The ancient Maya attributed the origin of writing to the gods.
- _____ 9. Scholars have discovered similarities between Zapotec and Mayan writing.
- _____ 10. Literacy was common in most ancient civilizations.

My Words

Write the words that are new to you. Look them up in the dictionary and write their definitions.

Words

Definitions

_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____
_____	_____

Word Families

noun	agriculture	People settled in Mesopotamia because it was a good area for agriculture.
adjective	agricultural	Wheat was one of the first agricultural products.
adverb	agriculturally	Mesopotamia was an agriculturally important part of the world.

noun	creator	The ancient Maya were the creators of temples and other beautiful structures.
noun	creation	The ancient Sumerians used clay and reeds for the creation of property records.
verb	create	The ancient Sumerians created tokens out of clay.
adjective	creative	Ancient peoples developed creative ways to record information.
adverb	creatively	Ancient peoples recorded information creatively, using materials such as clay.

noun	excavation	Early clay tablets and clay tokens have been found in excavations in Mesopotamia.
noun	excavator	Excavators found a clay tablet that dates from the time of the ancient Sumerians.
verb	excavate	When archeologists ¹ excavated the area, they found some ancient oracle bones.

¹BrE: archaeologists

ESSENTIAL WORDS FOR THE IELTS

noun	literacy	Literacy was not considered necessary before modern times.
noun	illiteracy	Illiteracy is a problem throughout the modern world.
adjective	literate	Few people were literate in the ancient world.
adjective	illiterate	An illiterate person cannot read or write.

noun	mythology	Mythology was very important in ancient civilizations.
noun	myth	Today we read the myths that were told in ancient times.
adjective	mythological	The Maya included mythological creatures in their writing system.

noun	specialty	That scholar's specialty is ancient Mayan culture.
noun	specialization	With the growth of agriculture, people developed specializations.
verb	specialize	Some scholars specialize in ancient studies.
adjective	specialized	Specialized skills are needed to identify ancient objects found in excavations.

Word Family Practice

Choose the correct word family member from the list below to complete each blank.

1..... working at ancient sites uncover objects that give us clues about life in the past. Household objects and tools that were used for 2..... can tell us a lot about how people lived long ago. Ancient people used a variety of materials to make the objects they used in daily life. Tools that were carved from wood, stone, and bone, and jars that were 3..... from clay are some examples of objects that have been found. Some of these objects are quite beautiful, and it is clear that they were made by people with 4..... skills. In ancient times, most people were not 5..... . However, traditional stories were an important part of ancient civilizations, and people told the 6..... of their culture to their children and grandchildren.

1. Excavations	Excavators	Excavates
2. agriculture	agricultural	agriculturally
3. creation	creators	created
4. specialty	specializes	specialized
5. literacy	illiterate	literate
6. mythology	myths	mythological

Dictionary Skill

Parts of Speech

The word *function* can be a verb or a noun.

Read the definitions below. Then read the sentences and write the letter of the correct definition for each sentence.

func-tion [FUNGK-shun]

A verb. to perform well

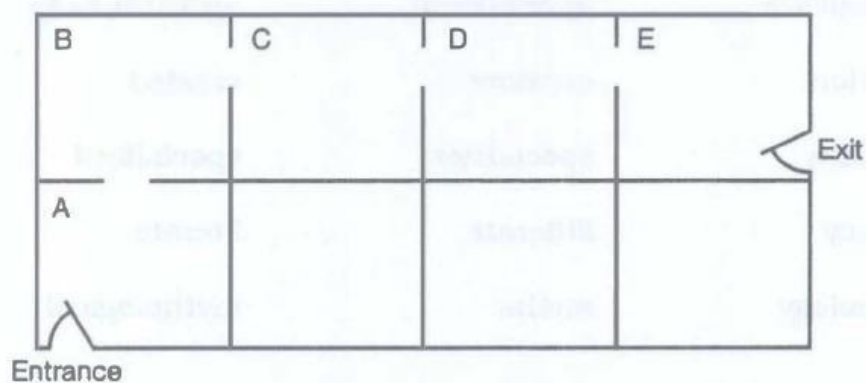
B noun. purpose, role

- _____ 1. The skills needed to *function* in modern society are very different from those needed in the ancient world.
- _____ 2. Mythology had an important *function* in ancient cultures.

Listening

CD 1
Track
11

Listen to the talk. Look at the map below labeled A-E. Look at the list of places and write the correct letter, **A-E**, next to numbers **1-5**.



- _____ 1. Visiting Scholars' Room
- _____ 2. Agricultural Tools Exhibit
- _____ 3. Recent Excavations Exhibit
- _____ 4. Mythology Exhibit
- _____ 5. Gift Shop