ORIGINS OF WRITING

Words

Look for the following words as you read the passage. Match each word with its correct definition.

Words	Definitions
1. adopt	A. v., to include
2. agricultural	B. n., the ability to read and write
3. attribute	C. v., to cut and shape hard material
4. carve	D. n., a thin, flat piece of material to write on
5. civilization[1]	E. n., something that is built, such as a building or bridge
6. creator	F. n., an area of digging, especially to find objects from past cultures
7. deed	G. adj., related to farming
8. encompass	H. n., the first maker of something
9. excavation	I. v., to perform well
10. function	J. n., human society, its organization[3] and culture
11. inscribe	K. v., to mark a surface with words or letters
12. literacy	L. n., an act, especially a good or bad one
13. mythology	M. v., to give credit for or see as the origin of something
14. property	N. n., set of traditional stories used to explain the origins of things
15. scholar	O. v., to accept or start to use something new
16. settle	P. adj., relating to a particular area or type of work
17. specialized[2]	Q. v., to establish a permanent place to live
18. structure	R. n., an object used to represent something else
19. tablet	S. n., person who has a lot of knowledge about a particular subject
20. token	T. n., something that is owned

[1]BrE: civilisation
[2]BrE: specialised
[3]BrE: organisation

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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 wedgelike 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

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before the rise of the Mayan civilization. The Zapotec culture, centered[1] 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

[1]BrE: centred
[2]BrE: specialised

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

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