

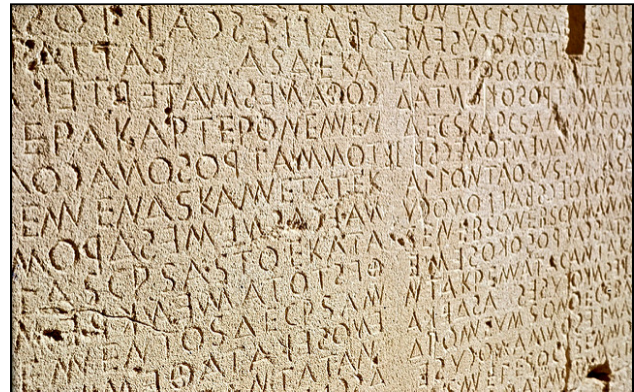
Name: _____ Class: _____

How did Greeks and Romans Write?

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What tools do you use when you need to write something down? Maybe a pen and a piece of paper, or possibly even an electronic tablet? Things weren't quite so simple in ancient times. In this text, Angela Murock Hussein discusses writing during ancient Greek and Roman times. As you read, take notes on what the ancient Greeks and Romans used to write and write on.

- [1] In ancient times, writing was not as widespread a skill as it is today. Usually, only administrators and the wealthy learned the skill. By Greek and Roman times, however, writing generally had become more widespread. Evidence for this fact is the extensive use of public inscriptions by the ancient Greeks and Romans, as well as the increase in the number of personal documents and in simple graffiti that people left behind on walls and monuments, much the same as they do today.



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A Great Innovation

Both the Greeks and the Romans used an alphabetic system of writing. This means that, for them, each sign represented a single sound, as opposed to many older methods that centered on a syllabic system, with each sign representing a combination of sounds. Responsible for the development of the alphabet used by the ancient Greeks and Romans were the Phoenicians, who lived in what today is Lebanon. This innovation¹ greatly simplified learning to read and write. Once created, the alphabet was adapted to several languages throughout the Mediterranean, Europe, and the Middle East from the eighth century B.C. onward.

The Greeks and Romans made extensive use of writing to keep records, to correspond, and to compose works of literature and learning. The surfaces upon which a person could write were numerous. Ancient inscriptions on stone, clay, and such metals as lead and bronze are often uncovered at excavation sites,² since these materials survive relatively well. However, they were not the most widely used writing surfaces, because they were heavy and impractical for day-to-day notes and transactions, as well as for longer works.

1. **Innovation (noun):** a new method, idea, or device
2. an area where earth has been removed to find something buried

Clever Tablets

Lighter media³ were required for most written works. Most likely, the most common were waxed boards. These objects, usually fashioned from wood or occasionally from ivory, had a shallow reservoir carved into them that was filled with soft wax. The boards could be used singly or bound together to make a type of book. Typically, two boards were fastened together with hinges and had their waxed surfaces facing each other. Such an object is known as a diptych, which is Greek for “two-folds.” Those with three boards fastened together were known as triptychs. Since wood and wax do not survive well under most conditions, finds of this type of writing tablet are rare. Still, many waxed boards have been found in places such as the deep mines in Romania.

- [5] The inscriptions found on uncovered writing tablets prove that people used the boards to record receipts, legal documents and agreements, letters, and other practical information. All of these could be made official with a personal stamp. The boards were light and portable, and the wax offered an advantage. It was soft, so writers could scratch words into it with a stick called a stylus. This tool was sharp on one end and flat on the other. The sharp end would etch the text into the wax. The flat side was used to erase the text, by smoothing the wax. These boards could be reused numerous times.

Carefully Fashioned Reeds and Skins

Other writing surfaces were made from materials that resembled the thin sheets of paper we use today. The best known of these was papyrus. Papyrus is a type of river reed that is native to Egypt and other areas in the eastern Mediterranean. The stalk of the plant would be cut into strips and laid out flat in a crisscross pattern. The strips would then be placed under weights to bind them together. The reeds had a natural adhesive within them that served to seal the strips to each other. This “paper” was then allowed to dry, and the resulting “sheets” could be used in much the same way as we use paper today. They could also be attached together to create longer sheets, which were then rolled up to make scrolls.

Animal skins were also used. There were two major types: vellum, made from calfskin, and parchment, made from calfskin, sheepskin, or goatskin. For both, the skin was first scraped thin and then drawn flat to dry. There were also books crafted out of linen cloth. Other materials that were commonly used for short notes and simple documents were potsherds⁴ and bits of stone. On all of these surfaces, the writing was done with ink.

Meet the Pen and Its Ink

Ancient inks were made, most often, from soot or ash. This was done by burning various materials and then adding to the mixture a binding agent,⁵ such as animal or plant glue. Other colors, such as red, could be made from mineral pigments. In either case, the coloring agent would be ground to a fine paste before an adhesive was added, and the mixture was left to dry in small clumps that resembled cakes. To use the ink, a writer needed only to add water, much as we do with watercolors today.

3. Here, “media” is the plural of “medium,” which refers to the different surfaces people wrote on.

4. a broken piece of pottery

5. a material or substance that holds other materials together

Ink was applied with a pen, which could be made of different materials. The oldest known pens were fashioned from reeds. The fibers of the plant would absorb a small amount of ink, but they had to be dipped repeatedly in ink as the writer worked. The same principle applied to feather pens, which used the central rib of the feather as a tube to soak up a small amount of ink for writing. Metal nibs, or pen tips, have been found that date at least as far back as Roman times. These indicate that manufactured pens were available as well. For reed and feather pens, a new tip could be created when the old one no longer worked properly. All that was needed was a small knife that had a crescent-shaped blade to pare⁶ off the end.

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6. to trim something by cutting its outer edges

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. PART A: Which TWO statements express the central idea of the text?
 - A. Most Greek and Roman writing tools were made from stone, meaning that they survived the best over time.
 - B. Ancient civilizations, such as the Greeks and Romans, crafted their own tools to be able to write and record important information.
 - C. By studying the written materials left behind by the Greeks and Romans, experts have learned that only the wealthy were educated.
 - D. Ancient Greeks and Romans are responsible for the simplified alphabet style used by most countries today.

2. PART B: Which detail from the text best supports the answer to Part A?
 - A. "This means that, for them, each sign represented a single sound, as opposed to many older methods that centered on a syllabic system, with each sign representing a combination of sounds." (Paragraph 2)
 - B. "The Greeks and Romans made extensive use of writing to keep records, to correspond, and to compose works of literature and learning." (Paragraph 3)
 - C. "The surfaces upon which a person could write were numerous." (Paragraph 3)
 - D. "Since wood and wax do not survive well under most conditions, finds of this type of writing tablet are rare." (Paragraph 4)

3. Which of the following describes the author's main purpose in the text?
 - A. to describe the different writing tools made and used by ancient Greeks and Romans
 - B. to argue that modern society owes a lot the inventions of the Greeks and Romans
 - C. to emphasize how similar ancient writing tools were to today's tools
 - D. to show how the ancient Greeks' alphabet evolved over time

4. How does paragraph 5 contribute to the development of ideas in the text?
 - A. It emphasizes how little experts know about the writing tools that most ancient civilizations used.
 - B. It shows how that all ancient civilizations used stone as writing surfaces, not waxed boards.
 - C. It shows how the ancient civilizations were able to make better tools and materials to meet their needs.
 - D. It highlights how similar the tablets used by the Greeks and Romans in the past are to our tablets today.

5. How do the writing materials left behind by the Greeks and Romans contribute to what we know about them today?

Discussion Questions

Directions: Brainstorm your answers to the following questions in the space provided. Be prepared to share your original ideas in a class discussion.

1. In the text, the author discusses the different writing tools and materials that ancient civilizations used. How have writing tools and materials changed over time?
2. In the text, the author describes how “people used the boards to record receipts, legal documents and agreements, letters, and other practical information” (Paragraph 5). What other important information or ideas do you think the ancient Greeks and Romans recorded?