

Transcript for **A Brief History of Writing**

Presenter: Writing – it helps us perform all sorts of activities every day. It's easy to assume that writing's always been around. But like most things, it had to be invented.

Have you ever written something down so you can remember it later on? Maybe you hear a good song on the radio and you decide to write it down on a piece of paper. Or, perhaps you're going shopping and you decide to write a shopping list. Well, in a sort of similar way, this is why people started to write thousands of years ago.

The earliest examples of writing are probably on clay tablets like these, written with the script cuneiform. They were made in the Middle East, in what is now Iraq, about five thousand years ago.

If you were a leader of a big old city, you'd probably want to keep track of what's going on, so you're going to write things down like how much money you've given people, or how much stuff you've got in storage. Well, this tablet here does just that. It's a record of all the beer rations given to workers. And, look here – this is somebody drinking some beer. Tell you what, I bet my dad would like to get paid in beer!

One of the most famous types of ancient writing is of course hieroglyphs, used by the Egyptians thousands of years ago. Like other early forms of writing, hieroglyphs look like pictures, but they're actually mostly signs that represent the sounds of the Egyptian language. I'm going to meet a modern-day scribe to find out how they did it.

Hello Paul! How are you doing?

Paul: Good.

Presenter: Thank you very much for letting me come to your studio. Could you show me through what you've got here?

Paul: So, this is papyrus, and I have a selection of different tools used for writing: reeds, woody reeds, bamboo, quills and rushes, which is what we're going to use for writing.

Presenter: And is this what they wrote with, back in Egypt?

Paul: Possibly. What I'll do is I'll just dip some, some of this ink here, and, uhm, hold the tool vertically. What that does is it gives you a nice edge to ...

Presenter: Oh, wow! Do you think I can make one with you?

Paul: Yes. So, a few things to remember: keep the rush vertical, and very lightly, don't squeeze it, and gently write on the ...

Presenter: Let it flow.

Paul: Yes.

Presenter: OK. Alright, here we go ... oh my goodness! Ha ha! It's really big! What's happening there? This is a set up! Alright, OK ... I blame my tools. So, what, what are you thinking, Paul? Do you think I'd make a good scribe?

Paul: I think you should quit while you are ahead!

Presenter: Some types of writing have become forgotten over time and can no longer be read. No one knows what's written on these small stone seals. They come from a great ancient civilisation that existed about three thousand five hundred years ago in the Indus valley, in what is now known as India and Pakistan. I wonder what they say.

Another type of script in use across the world today is Arabic, like this example we have here. Now, Arabic is the language of the Islamic holy book, the Quran, and unlike what you might be used to, Arabic reads from right to left. One thing about Arabic is that it can be very beautiful, and artists have used it for hundreds of years to make paintings, to cover objects in words and to decorate buildings, like these tiles from Iran used in mosques, palaces and shrines.

Did you know the oldest type of writing still in use today is Chinese? It's thousands of years old.

Because we can understand written messages from the past, we can often read about things that were never intended to be seen by others, like these Roman tablets found in the north of England. Some of them are just personal notes, like an invite to a birthday party, or announcing the delivery of some socks and pants.

The amazing thing about writing is it's allowed humans to do something quite special, and that is to record different ideas, events and messages and emotions without having somebody to be physically there to communicate them. And, like the messages we can read from the past, perhaps what you write today could also be read in hundreds or thousands of years' time in the future. Eh? Unknown error? What? You must restart your computer? Oh, I can't believe it!