



Amazing World Records of Language and Literature

World's First Writing:

Sumerian Cuneiform Language and Literature Worksheets and Activities

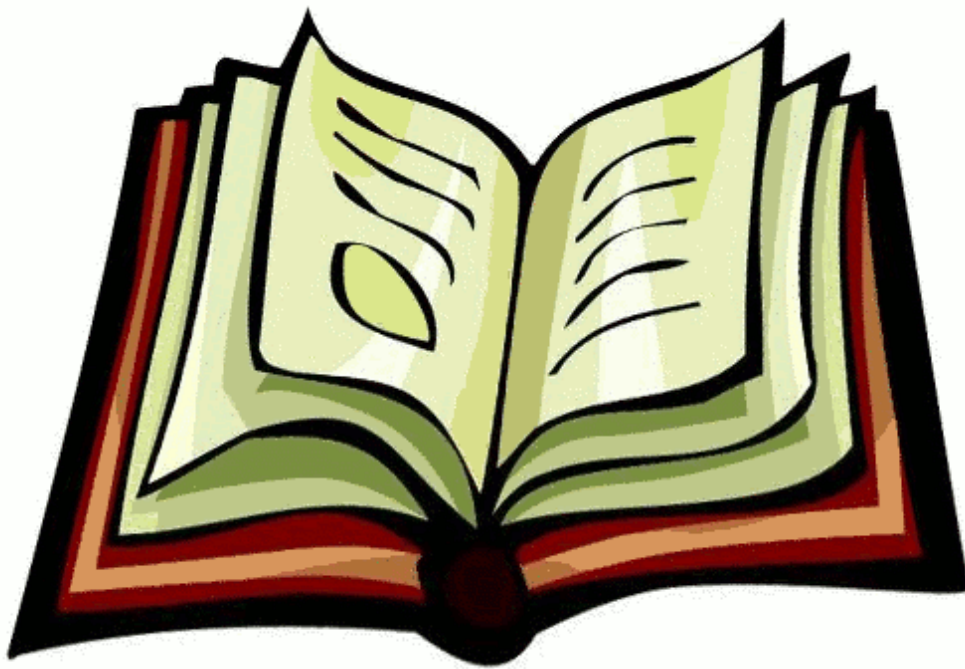
To the Teacher

Welcome to a superlative of language and literature!

This teaching packet is excerpted from the book, *Amazing World Records of Language and Literature*; the activity sheet numbers are for reference only.

Sharing World Records

However you integrate this packet into your teaching, always keep in mind that the student activity sheets provide countless opportunities to foster broader and deeper awareness of language and literature. Keep in mind, too, that children learn best when they're having fun. Foster surprise, delight, and awe about these superlatives of the human experience. Emphasize the drama that underlies every world record. Do your best to evoke wonderment of the grand human story. Good luck in this important work.



NCTE/IRA Standards

1. Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.
2. Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.
3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).
4. Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.
5. Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.
6. Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts.
7. Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and non-print texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.
8. Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.
9. Students develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles.
10. Students whose first language is not English make use of their first language to develop competency in the English language arts and to develop understanding of content across the curriculum.
11. Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.
12. Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).



5. The World's First Writing

Sumerian Cuneiform

NCTE/IRA Standards

- 9, 12

Time Required

- About two class periods

Teaching Tips

Students may work on the activity sheets individually, with a partner, or with a small group.

Activity Sheet 5A

- Emphasize that writing was an important advance for state-level societies that participated in trade.
- Emphasize the transition from complex symbols to simple symbols.

Activity Sheet 5B

- Encourage students to deduce the meaning of each character from its shape.
- Emphasize the evolution of cuneiform from drawings to representative characters.

Activity Sheet 5C

- Remind students of the difference between symbols and alphabetic letters.
- Emphasize the utility of symbols.

Answers

- *Activity Sheet 5A* 1. phonetic and logographic; 2. Reward creative, thoughtful answers; 3. Written records helped traders keep track of their merchandise and profits; 4. Writing allowed a ruler to spread propaganda and keep records of different kinds. It would probably increase the knowledge of a ruler's advisers. Because writing can preserve one's thoughts and deeds long after death, a ruler might hope to gain lasting fame by commissioning autobiographical writings. In general, writing promoted communication and knowledge; 5. more than 1,000; It decreased because words became more simplified and streamlined.
- *Activity Sheet 5B* hand, bread, to walk, trees. Reward creative symbols.
- *Activity Sheet 5C* Answers will vary. Reward thoughtful responses.

Extension and Enrichment

- Students can conduct research to learn about other cuneiform characters.
- Students can make their own cuneiform-style writing using clay tablets and styli.

Visit WorldRecordsBooks.com for more images and activities!



The World's First Writing

Activity Sheet 5A

Name _____ Class _____ Date _____

Directions: Read the article and answer the questions.

One of the most important and useful human inventions is writing. The written word is used for all kinds of communication, and it is one of the cornerstones of modern society.

Essentially, there are two kinds of writing systems: *phonetic* and *logographic*. Phonetic alphabets represent the sounds of a language; their building-blocks are letters which stand for consonant and vowel sounds, or sometimes combinations of the two. Logographic writing, on the other hand, represents units of meaning rather than of sound; in it, pictures and symbols stand for nouns and verbs.

The world's first writing system was *cuneiform*. Cuneiform developed around 3500 BCE in ancient Sumer, a civilization located in what is now southern Iraq. The word cuneiform means "wedge-shaped," and this name was chosen because cuneiform symbols were made by pressing a wedge-shaped reed into wet clay tablets. The first use of cuneiform appears to have been as a tool for traders to keep track of livestock and goods. Five symbols for "cow" meant five herds of cattle; three symbols for "sheep" represented three flocks of sheep. Thus, the world's earliest form of writing was also one of the world's earliest accounting systems.

As a new invention, cuneiform contained more than 1,000 different symbols, but as time went by it became much simpler. Within a few thousand years, the number of symbols had been reduced to about 400. The symbols themselves became less complicated, and the writing system became more uniform. These changes made cuneiform easier to learn and to use, and the subject matter it was used to express expanded to include more than matters of accounting and trade. The rulers of Sumer had their histories and achievements recorded, as well as information about their religion. By the time the phonetic alphabet was developed in Phoenicia, cuneiform was an extremely versatile and complex written language that had spread to nearly all of Sumer's neighbors.



1. What are the two basic types of writing systems?

2. What might be some of the advantages of a phonetic writing system over a logographic writing system?

3. Why was it important for ancient traders to be able to have a written record of their business?

4. Why might writing be an important tool for a ruler?

5. How many symbols did cuneiform have in the beginning? Why did the number of symbols decrease over time?

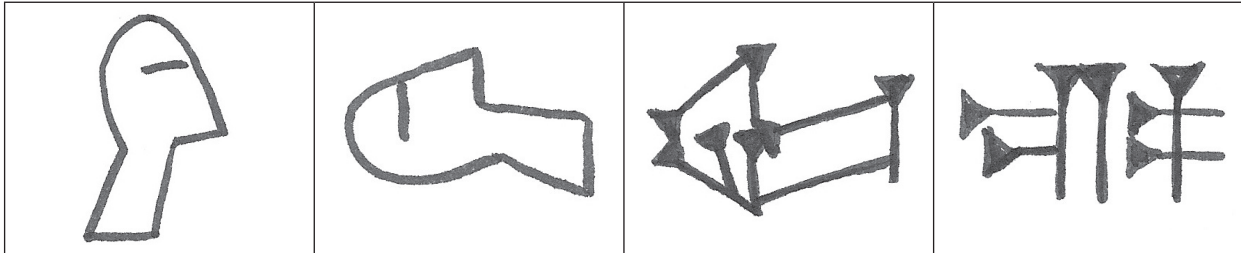


Reading Cuneiform

Activity Sheet 5B

Name _____ Class _____ Date _____

Over time, cuneiform characters developed from simple pictures into wedged-shaped symbols. For example, this is how the symbol for head evolved.



Directions: The examples below represent early cuneiform. See if you can match each symbol to its meaning.

Symbol	Meaning
	trees
	to walk
	hand
	bread

Directions: Now it's your turn to be creative. Invent and draw your own symbol for each word.

Symbol	Meaning
	god
	heaven
	man
	mountain
	drink
	plow
	sun
	woman



Symbols in Your Community

Activity Sheet 5C

Name _____ Class _____ Date _____

Even though English is notated using a phonetic alphabet, communication through logographic symbols is still common. Symbols can communicate simple but crucial knowledge quickly and therefore have not been entirely replaced; just think of all the street signs that use simple pictures to instantly convey their meanings. Generally, the symbols still in existence were initially chosen because they are easily identifiable and clearly correspond to that which they are intended to represent.

Directions: What are some things you read every day that are logographic rather than phonetic? As you walk around your school or community, take note of the symbols that you see and then record them in this table.

Symbol found	What does it mean?	Why do you think this symbol is used?

Symbol found	What does it mean?	Why do you think this symbol is used?