The Invention of Writing
CHAPTER ONE

The Invention of Writing

The earliest written records were found in Mesopotamia, in what is now known as the Middle East—specifically Syria and Iraq. This recorded information might include tax records, food inventories, bills of sale, etc. One theory holds that the origin of written language was simply to identify contents of pottery and various leather containers. Prior to early writing, information was memorized and verbally exchanged or passed down to later generations—obviously, an unreliable method of accurate record keeping.
Over 200,000 years ago, early visual markings were found in caves in and around Africa, Europe, and specifically in the Lascaux caves in Southern France.

These markings were not interpreted as “art” but more as visual images for utilitarian and ritualistic purposes.
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Markings represented animals, geometric shapes, or other graphic symbols, and were either smeared or painted on the cave walls with a finger or a reed “brush,” or etched into the surface.
Sometime before 3000 B.C.E., The Sumerians settled in Mesopotamia. They are attributed with initiating the path towards civilization, bringing about a more sophisticated form of writing that greatly impacted social order and economic progress.

The earliest written records were discovered on clay tablets created with a reed stylus sharpened to a point to create fine, curved lines. These markings were called Pictographs or Pictograms.
The clay or mud tablet was then dried in the hot sun. Unlike cave paintings, these tablets were more portable, albeit fragile and unwieldy to carry.
Pictographs eventually were created with a wooden or reed stylus that instead of being drawn onto the surface of the clay, were stamped into it using a variety of combinations to represent words. In addition, the images were turned on their sides to lessen smearing when written. This innovation evolved into abstract sign writing called cuneiform (Latin for “wedge-shaped.”)

By combining pictographs, people could created abstract ideas or emotions called ideographs.
Adverbs, prepositions, and personal names could not be adapted to representation, so cuneiform symbols began to represent the *sounds* of the objects. This ultimately became known as *rebus* writing.

Today, rebuses often combine letters and images to either create words or entire phrases.

Milton Glaser and Paul Rand created two of the most ubiquitous rebuses in the logos for New York and IBM.
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HISTORY OF GRAPHIC & WEB DESIGN

REBUS

Tur + is + ular

own + f - h

-h holiday

+s but all y+

a + o!
Like the Sumerian cuneiform, Egyptian hieroglyphics were the standard writing system for over three-and-a-half millennia. The Egyptians were sensitive to decorative and textural qualities in their writing, and color was often applied to the imagery.

Hieroglyphics were written in horizontal rows or vertical columns and were read according to the direction the images were facing—if the figures are facing left then begin reading from the left. If facing down, then start at the top and read down, etc.
The development of *papyrus* for writing was a major step forward in Egyptian visual communication.

Made from reeds growing along the banks of the Nile River, papyrus became the standard writing substrate and allowed for greater portability, efficiency, and versatility.

The reeds were trimmed, overlapped, and pounded until they became a single "sheet." They were then laid in the sun to try and the surface was smoothed with an ivory or stone polisher.
The Egyptians were the first to produce illustrated manuscripts where words and pictures were combined to communicate information.

Preoccupied with death and afterlife, Egyptian scribes and artists were commissioned to create funerary texts that would be buried with a person and aid in their transition into the afterlife.

The Book of the Dead, while not literally a book, was a selection of spells, passwords, and images written in a first-person narrative by the deceased and placed in the burial tomb along with the body.
The word **alphabet** was derived from the first two letters of the Greek alphabet, **alpha** and **beta**. A set of visual symbols or characters, the alphabet was a major step in human’s ability to communicate.

The hundreds of symbols used by cuneiforms and hieroglyphics were replaced by twenty or thirty easily-learned characters. The similarities in the Cretan pictographs, and Phoenician, Greek, and Roman alphabets clearly show the evolution of the western alphabet we use today.
The **Phoenician alphabet**, made up of twenty-two characters, was in use by 1500 B.C. Written right to left, the alphabet was both carved in stone as well as written on papyrus with a reed brush or pen.

At the same time, and first witnessed around 850 B.C., the **Aramaic alphabet** was written with a wide pen, held at a 45 degree angle that produced heavy horizontal and thin vertical strokes.

This style is the predecessor to two major alphabets used today—**Hebrew** and **Arabic**.
The **Phoenician alphabet** was adopted by the ancient Greeks around 1000 B.C. Five of the consonants were changed to vowels. From a graphic design standpoint, the Greeks applied geometric structure and order to the uneven Phoenician characters.

Initially, the Greeks adopted the Phoenician style of writing from right to left, but later they developed a writing method called **boustrophedon** meaning “to plow a field with an ox.” In other words, text was written and read from left to right, the next line left to right, and then right to left, etc.
Alphabets

During the second century A.D., the Greeks developed a more rounded style called **uncials**. Using these characters, text could be written more quickly with fewer strokes. Uncials also demonstrated how writing tools and substrates influence written forms.

**Scrolls** made of papyrus were commonly used as the preferred substrate for writing lots of related text content.

Unfortunately, most of the knowledge and information recorded about Greek civilization has been lost due to the fragile nature of papyrus scrolls and the damp Greek climate.
During the second century B.C., the Romans conquered Greece and whole libraries of information was moved to Rome. Greek literature, art, and religion were altered to conform to the conditions of Roman society and spread throughout the vast Roman Empire. The Greek alphabet was altered by the Romans by adding the letter G to replace the Z (zeta), which had little value to the Latin language. The **Latin alphabet** then, had 21 characters—A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, K, L, M, N, O, P, Q, R, S, T, V and X.

The Greek letters Y and Z were added because the Romans were appropriating Greek words and sounds. Three additional letters, J, U, and W were added, completing the 26-character alphabet used today in western culture.
In the study of the Roman alphabet, there has been much discussion concerning the serifs on the ends of the character strokes. One theory holds that they were made by the stonemasons’ chisels as a way to “clean up” the stroke ends. Others would argue that they were first drawn on the stone by the scribes with a flat brush to sharpen the terminals.
The written Roman hand had two prominent forms—the most important, **Capitalis Quadrata** (square capitals)...

and **Capitalis Rustica**. These letterforms were condensed to take up less space and were quickly written. Substrates were expensive, and rustica enabled scribes to write half again as many letters as was possible with the square capitals.
The Korean alphabet, known as **Hangul**, is considered one of the most scientific writing systems ever invented.

Fourteen consonants are represented by abstract depictions of the position of the mouth and tongue when they are spoken, and are placed in five groups of related sounds. Ten vowels are signified by dots positioned next to the horizontal or vertical lines. The vertical line symbolizes a person, the horizontal line the earth, and the round dot is seen as a symbol of heaven.
CHAPTER THREE
The Asian Contribution

Calligraphy is considered the highest art form in China. Oriental painting and calligraphy are executed with ink on paper or silk using gestured strokes of the brush.

During the Han Dynasty (third century A.D., seals called chops were made by carving calligraphic characters in a flat surface of jade, silver, gold, or ivory—similar to that of a present day rubber stamp. These were used to make identification imprints, and are considered to be the first form of printing.
In addition to papyrus as a standard substrate for writing, **parchment** became popular around 190 B.C. It was made from the skins of domestic animals—calves, sheep, and goats.

Unlike **papyrus**, parchment could be folded, stitched, and written on both sides. The **codex** replaced the scroll for a variety of reasons—it eliminated the clumsy rolling and unrolling of the scrolls, was much stronger than fragile papyrus, could be written on both sides, and saved storage space.
Hand-written and illustrated books gave rise to what are called **illuminated manuscripts**. Gold leaf and beautifully rendered letters and images gave the sensation of each page being literally illuminated. During the Christian era in Europe, manuscripts were created in monastic **scriptoriums** or writing rooms. The monks painstakingly lettered and illustrated these manuscripts primarily depicting religious themes and teachings.
Many were small enough to fit into a saddlebag and this portability enabled knowledge and ideas to be spread from one region or time period to another.

The Bible of Borso d’Este from rarebookbuyer.com
A consistent design approach to these illuminated manuscripts was the use of crisp rustic lettering, wide margins, and justified text columns. Generally the first letter on the page was intricately illustrated, and the text was framed by an equally elaborate border. Religious iconography or images from nature were often the subject of the illustrations.

Full pages of decorative design were called carpet pages because of their intricate patterning associated with oriental carpets.
CHAPTER FOUR
Illuminated Manuscripts

During Charlemagne’s reign over the whole of central Europe in the 700s, a revival of learning and the arts flourished. Charlemagne attempted to standardize page layout, writing style, and decoration. With Celtic influences, including the use of guidelines, ascenders and descenders, letters were ordered into a uniform script called Caroline minuscules.

Caroline minuscules are the forerunner of our contemporary lowercase alphabet. This new alphabet restored legibility and were more practical and easier to write.

A page from the Book of Kells, 794-806 A.D.
CHAPTER FOUR

Illuminated Manuscripts

The **Romanesque** period between 1000 and 1500 A.D. brought about renewed religious fervor. The need for large liturgical books, bibles, Gospels and psalters reached its peak and for the first time, universal design characteristics were possible.

**Gothic** lettering and illumination, influenced by the elaborate architectural spires in Germany, demonstrated strong verticals capped with pointed serifs. Space between letters and words was condensed and rounded letters were all but eliminated. **Textura** is the name for this type of Gothic lettering due to the dense black texture of the pages.

A page from the Douce Apocalypse, 1265 A.D.
Summary Terms

• pictographs
• cuneiform
• ideographs
• hieroglyphics
• papyrus
• parchment
• alphabets
  • Phoenician
  • Greek
  • Roman
• uncial
• scrolls
• codex
• calligraphy
• illuminated manuscripts
• Gothic/Textura