

ORIGINS OF THE ALPHABET

The origins of the alphabet begin within the shadowy realms of prehistory. At some time within that shadowed prehistory, humankind began to communicate visually. Motivated by the need to communicate facts about the environment around them, humans made simple drawings of everyday objects such as people, animals, weapons and so forth. These object drawings are called *pictographs*.

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As humankind began to see the need for communication of more abstract thoughts through visual marks, the meaning of pictographs began to take on broader meanings. The mark for ox, for example, could also mean wealth, food, or strength. Interpretation of a single pictograph was ambiguous, and lacking context. Combining several pictographs together provided context, and more complex abstract meanings could be conveyed: for example, pictographs of a woman and a child together could combine to represent happiness.

Once symbols no longer represented objects, but ideas, they became a new evolutionary step in our alphabet, the *ideograph*. Many early cultures communicated and kept records by combining symbols for the concrete (pictographs) and for the abstract (ideographs). However, there were

disadvantages to this system: not only were the symbols complex, but their numbers tally into the tens of thousands, making learning difficult and writing slow.

An early culture that inspired to innovate a simpler, more efficient writing system was the Phoenicians. The Phoenicians were a wide-flung trading people of great vitality, with complex business transactions that required accurate record keeping. It was through their need for keeping ledgers and business accounts that they evolved a system around 1500 B.C. that used signs to stand for sounds of syllables. As this system had markedly fewer symbols to learn than the old ideograph system, it streamlined learning time and made rapid writing possible. They had found a perfect business tool.

Around 800 B.C., the Greeks adopted the Phoenician alphabet. The Greeks added A, E, I, O, and U to the Phoenician base of 22 letters. Adoption of the alphabet by the Greeks was to have a tremendous impact upon

Modern Roman	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T
Early Latin	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T
Greek	Α	Β	Γ	Δ	Ε	Ζ	Η	Θ	Ι	Κ	Λ	Μ	Ν	Ξ	Ο	Π	Ρ	Σ	Τ
Phoenician	𐤀	𐤁	𐤂	𐤃	𐤄	𐤅	𐤆	𐤇	𐤈	𐤉	𐤊	𐤋	𐤌	𐤍	𐤎	𐤏	𐤐	𐤑	𐤒
Early Aramaic	𐤀	𐤁	𐤂	𐤃	𐤄	𐤅	𐤆	𐤇	𐤈	𐤉	𐤊	𐤋	𐤌	𐤍	𐤎	𐤏	𐤐	𐤑	𐤒
Nabataean	𐤀	𐤁	𐤂	𐤃	𐤄	𐤅	𐤆	𐤇	𐤈	𐤉	𐤊	𐤋	𐤌	𐤍	𐤎	𐤏	𐤐	𐤑	𐤒
Arabic	ا	ب	ت	ث	ج	ح	خ	د	ذ	ر	ز	س	ش	ص	ض	ط	ظ	ف	ق

The Phoenician Alphabet used in the ancient times.

the development of the alphabet, for it was through the auspices of Greeks and later through their cultural admirers, the Romans, that the alphabet was to finally take on a distinct resemblance to the modern Western alphabet.

When the Romans adopted the Greek alphabet, along with other aspects of Greek culture, they continued the development and usage of the alphabet. Just as the Greeks had modified the Phoenician alphabet, the Romans adopted and modified the Greek alphabet. Thirteen letters were accepted in an unchanged form from the Greek: A, B, E, H, I, K, M, N, O, T, X, Y, Z. Eight letters were revised: C, D, G, L, P, R, S, V. Two letters were added: F and Q. With an alphabet of twenty-three letters, the Romans had all the letters needed to write Latin. The Romans also dropped the Greek designations for the letters, such as alpha, beta, and gamma, for the simpler A, B, C's that we know today.

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The development of the alphabet was to continue under the writing implements of medieval scribes. It was during the medieval era that the letters U, W, and J were added to the alphabet. Also during this time, lowercase

letters developed as a natural result of the use of the flexible reed pen for writing manuscripts. Lowercase letters for the most part require fewer strokes for their formation, allowing the scribes to fit more letters in a line of type. The combination of speed and space conservation was important to monks writing lengthy manuscripts on expensive parchment, and the use of lowercase letters was widely adopted in a relatively short time period. By the time Johannes Gutenberg developed the printing press in 1450, the basic formation of the alphabet was set into its familiar modern form.

The visual style, however, of the modern day alphabet is as varied as the thousands of typefaces and type families available today. Access to computer technology allows typographers and designers more options than ever, while still basing communication on those essential twenty-six letters.

Our present day twenty-six letter alphabet is the result of thousands of years of evolution. The basic shape of the alphabet may be modified, simplified, or embellished, but the basic shapes cannot be changed without significantly weakening communication and legibility.

