

Student Handout 2 – Writing in Egypt

Writing

The ancient Egyptians believed that it was important to record and communicate information about religion and government. Thus, they invented written scripts that could be used to record this information.

The most famous of all ancient Egyptian scripts is [hieroglyphic](#). However, throughout three thousand years of ancient Egyptian civilization, at least three other [scripts](#) were used for different purposes. Using these scripts, [scribes](#) were able to preserve the beliefs, history and ideas of ancient Egypt in temple and tomb walls and on [papyrus](#) scrolls.

Hieroglyphs and Scribes

An important group of people in Egypt were the [scribes](#). However, it was not easy to become a scribe. Education was not free in ancient Egypt and a scribe's training took up to twelve years to complete. People envied the scribes because they did not have to labor in the fields or fight the pharaoh's enemies. They were held in high regard by society.

Scribes worked in temple writing rooms, markets, army barracks, the homes of nobles, government offices or anywhere their skills were needed. These highly trained men could read and write the Egyptian script called hieroglyphics, or holy writing. To us this writing looks like tiny pictures or symbols. Each picture represented a different idea or letter or sound, as it was a very complicated system.

Scribes wrote on papyrus, a type of paper made from the papyrus plant growing by the Nile. Fine brushes made of plant fiber were used as we would use a pen. The black ink was made from soot and water. For headings and borders, a red ink was made from a stone called ochre, which was found in the desert. Everyday messages were written on broken pieces of pottery; very important information was carved into stone so that it lasted forever. Scribes kept records of supplies and taxes, wrote letters and messages, designed the inscriptions carved into tombs and worked as teachers and librarians.

(adapted from <http://www.discovery.com> and <http://www.ancientegypt.co.uk/writing/homemain.html>)

Stop and Jot:

- *Compare and contrast the development of writing in Mesopotamia and Egypt. How was it similar and different? Think about the technology of writing... tools and writing surfaces, for example.*

- *Why would someone want to become a scribe? Where did scribes seem to fit in the social hierarchy?*