**Definition:** writing systems from *The Macmillan Encyclopedia*

The recording of human communication using signs or symbols to represent spoken words or concepts. The earliest known writing systems were all originally pictographic; if they survived at all they developed into ideographic writing systems (See also Chinese). True alphabetic writing, representing the sounds of the language, developed around the E Mediterranean about 2000 BC (See Semitic alphabets). An intermediate stage is the use of syllabaries.

**Summary Article:** writing

From *The Columbia Encyclopedia*

the visible recording of language peculiar to the human species. Writing enables the transmission of ideas over vast distances of time and space and is a prerequisite of complex civilization. Where, and by whom writing was first developed remains unknown, but scholars place the beginning of writing at 6,000 B.C. The norm of writing is phonemic; i.e., it attempts to symbolize all significant sounds of the language and no others (see phonetics). When the goal is established as one letter for one phoneme (and vice versa), the result is a complete alphabet. Few alphabets attain this phonemic ideal, but some ancient ones (e.g., Sanskrit) and some modern new ones (e.g., Finnish) have been very successful. The contemporary important writing not of alphabetic type is that in Chinese characters, in which thousands of symbols are used, each representing a word or concept, and Japanese, where each character represents a syllable. The Chinese system is distant enough from the spoken language that the same characters are used in writing mutually unintelligible dialects, e.g., Cantonese and Mandarin. In some languages, as in English and French, the modern freezing of spelling has removed the writing more and more from pronunciation and has resulted in the need to teach spelling and the growth of fallacies like the “silent” letter (a letter is really either the symbol of a sound or it is unnecessary). Writing was developed independently in Egypt (see hieroglyphic), Mesopotamia (see cuneiform), China, and among the Zapotec, Olmec, and Maya in Central America. There are some areas where the question as to whether writing was adopted or independently developed is in doubt, as at Easter Island. Ancient writing, at first pictographic in nature, is best known from stone and clay inscriptions, but the use of perishable materials, mainly palm leaf, papyrus, and paper, began in ancient times. See accent; calligraphy; punctuation; paleography.


Columbia Encyclopedia, © Columbia University Press 2018