

The Changing Alphabet

The Phoenicians developed a system of writing around 1000 B.C. Their system contained 22 symbols closely related to Egyptian and Sumerian pictographs plus geometric signs they invented themselves. Each sign represented a different consonant sound; there were no signs for vowels.

When the Greeks came in contact with Phoenician traders, they learned the concept of writing individual sounds for language. Around 800 B.C. the Greeks borrowed the symbols from the Phoenicians and modified them to form the Greek alphabet. Since the Phoenician alphabet had more consonants than the Greeks needed for their language, they used the extra signs to represent vowel sounds. This was a vast improvement over previous systems because now the Greeks could combine signs for consonants and vowels to spell any word.

The Greeks adopted Phoenician names for their letters. The first letter in the Phoenician alphabet is "aleph," meaning ox. The pictograph for this letter was an ox head. The Greeks changed the shape of the Phoenician letter slightly and named it "alpha." The second Phoenician letter was called "beth," meaning house. It was changed to "beta" by the Greeks.

Sometime after 800 B.C. the Etruscans moved to central Italy and brought the Greek alphabet with them. As the Romans adopted this system, they also modified it. The early Roman alphabet had about 20 letters and gradually added three more. Originally everything was written in capital letters. After the death of Jesus and the change of time reference from B.C. to A.D., scribes used rounded lowercase letters because they were easier to form and took up less space in books than capital letters.

Use the chart to write a message, letter, cargo list, proverb, poem, or story. Trade papers with a classmate, and each of you try to decipher the other's message.

Phoenician 1000 B.C.	Greek 800 B.C.	Roman A.D. 100	Modern
𐤀	Α	A	A
𐤁	Β	B	B
𐤂	Γ	C	C
𐤃	Δ	D	D
𐤄	Ε	E	E
𐤅	Ϝ	F	F
𐤆	Ζ	G	G
𐤇	Η	H	H
𐤈	Θ	I	I
𐤉	Κ	K	K
𐤊	Λ	L	L
𐤋	Μ	M	M
𐤌	Ν	N	N
𐤍	Ξ	O	O
𐤎	Ο	P	P
𐤏	Ϙ	Q	Q
𐤐	Ρ	R	R
𐤑	Σ	S	S
𐤒	Τ	T	T
𐤓	Υ	V	V
𐤔	Ϝ	X	X
𐤕	Ζ	Y	Y
𐤖	Η	Z	Z

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<p>1. What did each sound represent in the Phoenician alphabet?</p>	
<p>2. Who did the Phoenicians get their alphabet idea from?</p>	
<p>3. How did vowels start being used?</p>	
<p>4. Who adopted the Phoenician alphabet? How was it changed twice (in the ancient world)</p> <p>- Use transition words</p>	
<p>5. Use the chart to write a message, letter, or cargo list, proverb or poem. Trade with a classmate and try to decipher the Phoenician language.</p>	