

EARLY WRITING: THE PICTOGRAPH, LOGOGRAPH, SYLLABARY, AND ALPHABET

The first generally phonetic alphabet including both vowels and consonants was the Phoenician alphabet, which later inspired both the Greek alphabet and the Roman one we use in English today. Before phonetic systems appeared, the oldest types of writing involved pictographs. In pictographic writing systems, one symbol or image represents one idea or referent. To illustrate this for English speakers, we might use an example of a **pictographic** symbol for "eye":



Pictographs often originate as literal drawings of what they depict, but these symbols often gradually become more abstract.

A **syllabary** system uses one symbol or image to represent a single syllable--often using puns in which a syllable can also be a word. For instance, in a syllabary, we might write the following:



These symbols would translate into "I am a fish." The first symbol might represent pictographically "eye" or logographically "I"--it all depends upon context. The symbol "M" might represent the word "am," and the symbol "A" might represent the indefinite article, and the last symbol might mean "fish" or also similar-sounding words like "fresh" or "flesh." In Sumer, the early pictographic system gradually became a **mixed syllabary** combining both pictographic symbols doubling as syllables and **logographic** symbols for entire words. The symbols and meaning of King Hammurabi's name in Sumerian are as follows:



("fish" + "wild bull" + "year" + "[unknown]" + "innkeeper")

Such a system contrasts with an **alphabet** in which each symbol ideally represents a vowel or consonant unit of sound rather than an entire syllable or an entire word.