

SCRIPTS
CONNECT
HUMANITY

Writing Systems of the World:
Alphabets, Syllabaries, and Logograms

- Course arc: speech into visible marks, scripts classified, differences that matter
- Three families to compare: alphabets, syllabaries, logograms—plus hybrid types
- Roughly 293 known writing systems, about 156 in active use today
- Around 7,000 living languages share far fewer scripts
- Anchor scripts: Latin, Greek, Cyrillic, Arabic, Hebrew, Devanagari, Hangul, kana, Chinese, Maya, Cherokee, Linear B



From Speech to Script: Core Concepts and Terminology

- Scripts encode phonemes, syllables, morphemes, or words
- Distinct visual units: glyph, character, sign, grapheme, allograph
- Two grand strategies: phonography (sound) versus morphography (meaning)
- Current five-part typology: logosyllabary, syllabary, abjad, alphabet, abugida
- Older three-way scheme was inadequate and wrongly ranked alphabets as superior
- Direction, casing, spacing, punctuation, and layout travel with scripts
- Correcting misconceptions: logograms are not picture-writing; no script is superior

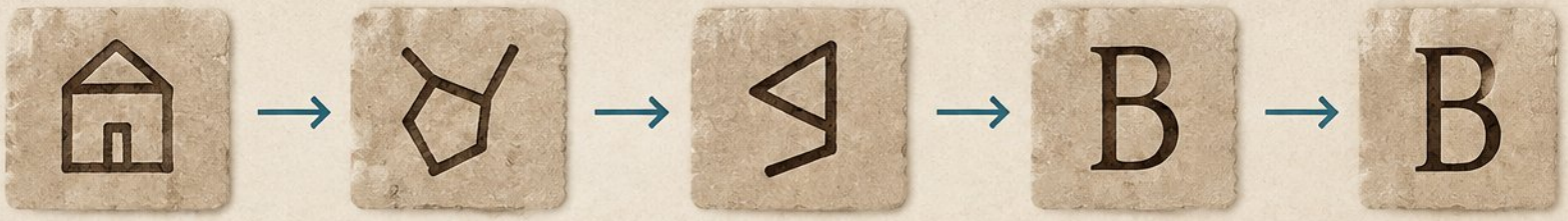


FIVE-PART TYPOLOGY OF SCRIPTS

Logosyllabary	Syllabary	Abjad	Alphabet	Abugida
𓅓 田 ≈	あ か さ	ب ج د	A B C	क ग च

How Scripts Travel:
From Proto-Sinaitic to the Alphabet Family

PEOPLES
IDEAS
LETTERS
A SHARED STORY



Egyptian-style house glyph "house" (bayt) | Proto-Sinaitic | Phoenician | Greek | Latin

A single sign, a wider world.

- Proto-Sinaitic graffiti at Wadi el-Hol, c. 1850 BCE: forerunners of West Semitic writing
- Acrophonic principle: "house" (bayt) yields /b/, eventually the letter B
- Early inscriptions ran any direction; right-to-left fixed by the 11th century BCE
- Phoenician trade spreads the script; Aramaic and Greek are key descendants
- Greeks repurpose unused consonantal signs for vowels around 800 BCE
- Etruscan (c. 700 BCE) becomes the model for Latin



Alphabets and Abjads: Consonants, Vowels, and Direction

WRITING CONNECTS CULTURES

Alphabets write both consonants and vowels: Greek, Latin, Cyrillic, Armenian, Georgian

Abjads write consonants only; vowels come from context or diacritics—Arabic, Hebrew

Greek around 800 BCE repurposed unused consonants for vowels: the first true alphabet

Cyrillic and Armenian adapt Greek shapes, sound values, and letter order

Direction: 59% left-to-right, 16% right-to-left; boustrophedon flips letter shapes

Vowel-less writing works when consonants carry meaning, strains when they don't

The same idea, different writing systems

ONE MEANING. MANY SCRIPTS.

Greek	λόγος	Writes consonants and vowels	→ Left-to-right
Latin	logos	Writes consonants and vowels	→ Left-to-right
Cyrillic	логос	Writes consonants and vowels	→ Left-to-right
Armenian	լոգոս	Writes consonants and vowels	→ Left-to-right
Arabic	لوغوس	Writes consonants only	← Right-to-left
Hebrew	לוגוס	Writes consonants only	← Right-to-left

SCRIPTS SHAPE HUMAN CONNECTION

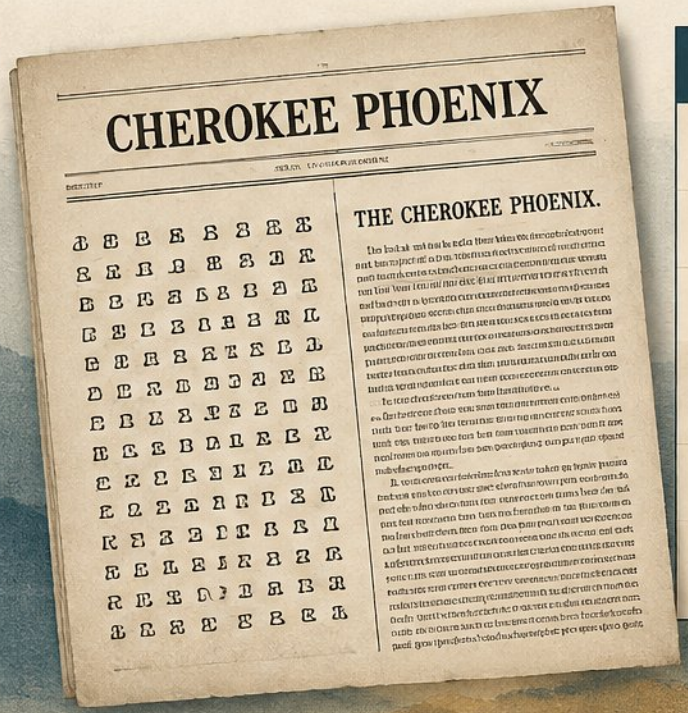


Syllabaries and Abugidas: Encoding Syllables

- True syllabaries use one sign per syllable: Linear B, Cherokee, hiragana, katakana, Yi
- Abugidas pair a consonant base with an inherent vowel plus modifying vowel signs
- Devanagari, Bengali, Thai, Telugu, Tamil, and Ethiopic all work this way
- Syllabaries suit simple syllable structures; consonant clusters make them unwieldy
- Sequoyah, illiterate, moved from logograms to an 85–86 sign Cherokee syllabary by 1821
- Cherokee Council adopted it in 1826; the bilingual Cherokee Phoenix began printing in 1828

Cherokee Syllabary

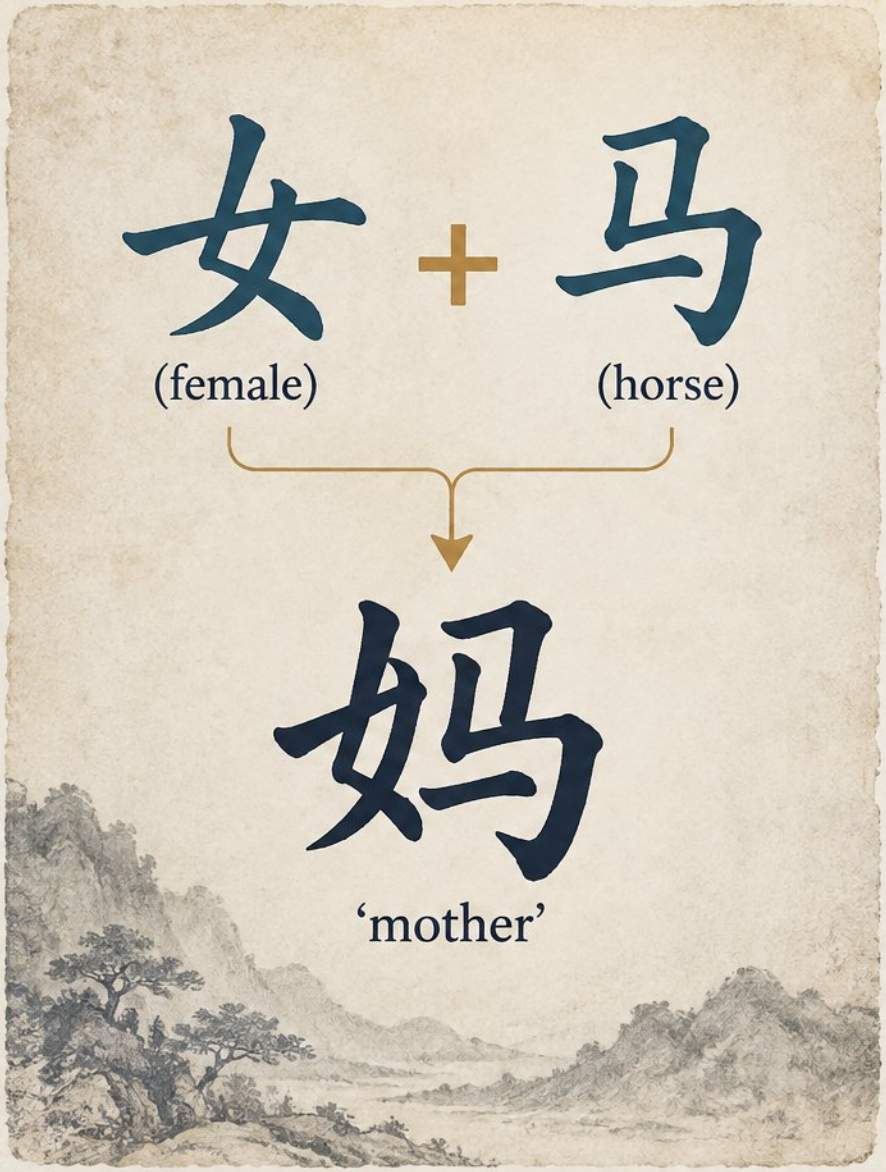
Ꭰ	Ꭱ	Ꭲ	Ꭳ	Ꭴ	Ꭵ	Ꭶ
Ꭷ	Ꭸ	Ꭹ	Ꭺ	Ꭻ	Ꭼ	Ꭽ
Ꭾ	Ꭿ	Ꮀ	Ꮁ	Ꮂ	Ꮃ	Ꮄ
Ꮅ	Ꮆ	Ꮇ	Ꮈ	Ꮉ	Ꮊ	Ꮋ
Ꮌ	Ꮍ	Ꮎ	Ꮏ	Ꮐ	Ꮑ	Ꮒ
Ꮓ	Ꮔ	Ꮕ	Ꮖ	Ꮗ	Ꮘ	Ꮙ



Hiragana and Katakana

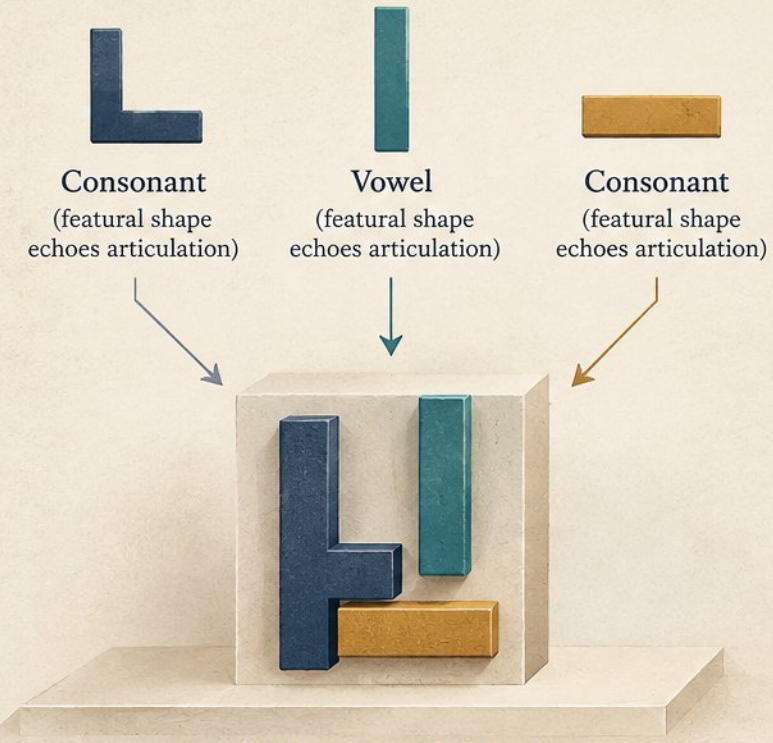
あ	い	う	え	お
か	き	く	け	こ
さ	し	す	せ	そ
ア	イ	ウ	エ	オ
カ	キ	ク	ケ	コ
サ	シ	ス	セ	ソ

Logograms and Morphographic Systems: Chinese Characters and Beyond



- Characters stand for morphemes or words, not just sounds
- Three components: semantic, phonetic, and pure-form signs
- Phono-semantic compounds dominate—about 58% of the 3,500 most frequent characters
- 女 (female) + 马 (horse) → 妈 'mother'; 木 'tree' radical organizes wood and tree names
- Rebus principle: signs detach from pictures and stand for sound
- Japanese runs kanji alongside hiragana and katakana

Hybrid Systems and New Scripts: Hangul, Japanese, and Modern Inventions

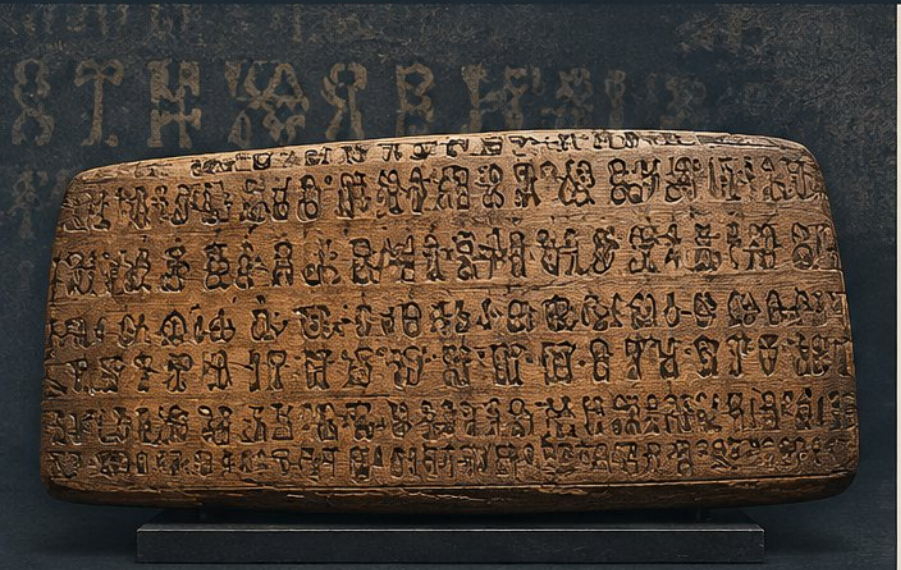


Assembled Hangul syllable block

- Hangul: featural alphabet; letters assemble into syllable blocks, shapes echo articulation
- Mixed systems are the norm: Japanese kana plus kanji; Egyptian and Maya combine sign types
- Invented and minority scripts now in Unicode: Canadian Aboriginal Syllabics, Osage (2014), Adlam, Pahawh Hmong
- Cherokee shows the path: print, then keyboards, localization, and OS support
- Writing systems are still being designed, not just inherited



Undeciphered Scripts: What We Know and What We Don't





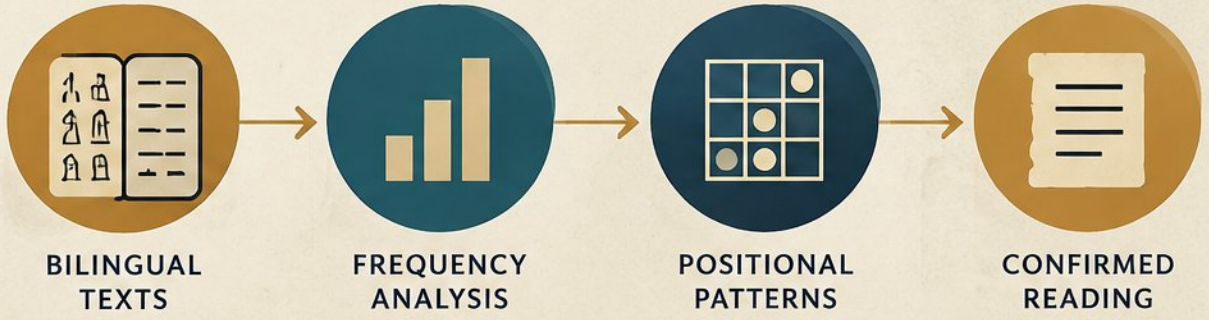
- Still unsolved: Linear A, Indus, Rongorongo, Proto-Elamite, Phaistos Disc, Voynich
- Linear A: Linear B sign values help, but the Minoan language stays unknown
- Indus: texts average five signs, longest just seventeen; no bilingual anchor
- Rongorongo: ~400 glyphs; a 15th-century tablet predates European contact
- Meroitic warns: readable sounds without a known language still mean nothing

Decipherment and Discovery: How Lost Scripts Are Read

WRITING CONNECTS WORLDS

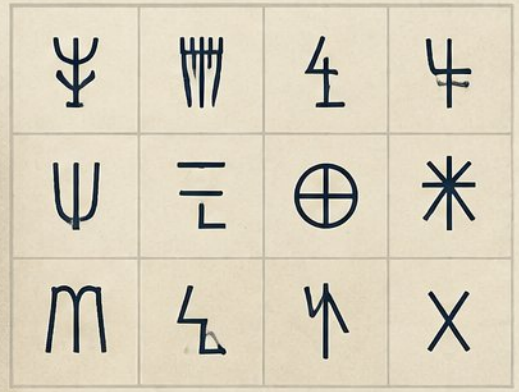
- Landmark decipherments: Champollion (hieroglyphs), Ventris (Linear B), Rawlinson (cuneiform), Knorozov (Maya)
- Incremental groundwork by Young, Kober, and Grotefend mattered as much as breakthroughs
- Core methods: bilingual texts, proper names, frequency analysis, positional patterns
- Harder for logographic scripts: thousands of signs, uncertain readings
- Computational turn: generative text restoration, GAN glyph matching, combinatorial cognate analysis

A PATH FROM SIGNS TO MEANING





LINEAR B TABLET



SIGN INVENTORY (EXAMPLE)

Scripts, Languages, and Identities:
Social and Political Dimensions

- One language, many scripts: Serbian, Hindi–Urdu, Yiddish, Azerbaijani, Kazakh
- Script choice signals identity, religion, and geopolitics—never merely technical
- Turkish 1928 reform and Chinese simplification: classic twentieth-century cases
- Kazakhstan's 2017 Latin decree remains unfinished; state sites still use Cyrillic
- Uzbekistan's 1993 Latinization left a Latin-first but dual-script order
- 2026 Common Turkic Alphabet proposals approved for Kazakh and Kyrgyz

Біз бір халықпыз. → Biz bir halyqpyz.





Writing in the Digital Age: Encoding, Fonts, and Input

SCRIPTS
PEOPLE
IDEAS
A SHARED
TOMORROW

- Unicode 18.0 (September 2026) adds 13,007 characters, passing 172,000 total
- 18.0 adds the Small Seal script and Jurchen; three new currency symbols
- Recent additions: Sidetic, Tolong Siki, Beria Erfe (17.0); Garay, Sunuwar, Todhri (16.0)
- Berkeley's Script Encoding Initiative drafts proposals for minority and historical scripts
- Complex scripts need cursive joining, conjuncts, and bidirectional layout
- Input: keyboards, IMEs, handwriting recognition, and voice
- Cherokee moved from print to Unicode, gaining lowercase forms in 2015
- Emoji are standardized and expressive, but not a full writing system

Unicode





Shaping: from characters to a written form



Input





MORE SCRIPTS
A MORE INCLUSIVE WORLD

Museum and Classroom Applications: Reading Scripts on Display

PEOPLE
SCRIPTS
CULTURES
CONNECTED

FROM OBJECTS TO UNDERSTANDING

- Visitor checklist: script type, direction, materials, and archaeological context
- One big idea per label; plain language, active voice, short sentences
- Layer text: heading for skimmers, summary sentence, deeper detail below
- Point to what visitors can see, and admit uncertainty honestly
- Hands-on: trace a name in three scripts; compare one text across systems



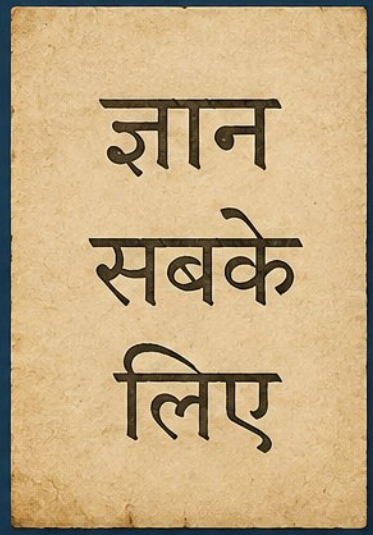
SCRIPTS REVEAL
MORE THAN WORDS

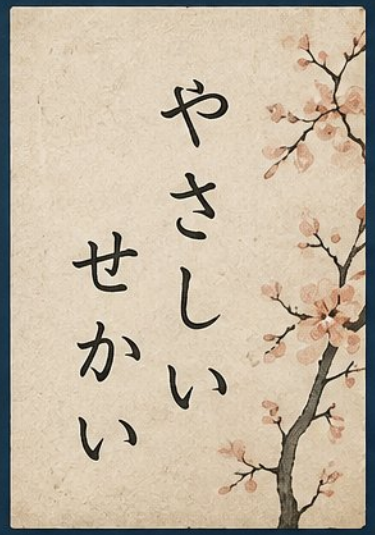
LOOK CLOSER
ASK QUESTIONS
DISCOVER TOGETHER

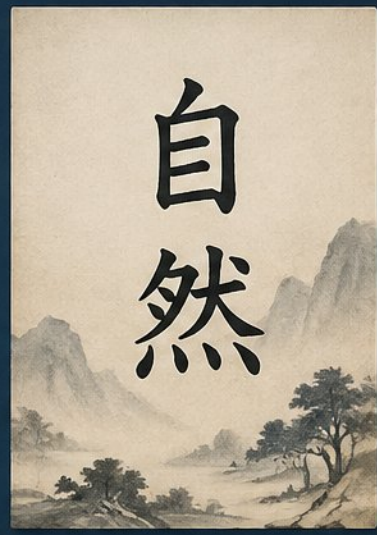
Capstone Activity: Classify, Compare, and Explain a Script











- Teams classify a sample: Greek, Arabic, Devanagari, kana, or Chinese
- Identify what it encodes and note its direction
- Compare: what if this language switched script type?
- Write a 60-word museum label with one concrete visual detail
- Peer review: accurate terms, no script superiority claims, visible detail cited
- Self-check: can you now name all five types?

SCRIPTS CONNECT PEOPLE — LANGUAGES TELL HUMAN STORIES

Key Takeaways and Further Resources

- Writing systems encode different units; most real scripts are hybrids
- No hierarchy: five-part typology replaces the old three-way ranking
- Alphabetic scripts share one root; each adaptation fits its language
- Recurring stories: invention, reform, decipherment, and digital encoding
- Scripts shape access to archives, education, services, and history
- Keep exploring: *World's Writing Systems*, Unicode charts, *Script Encoding Initiative*



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