Name: _____

Date: _____

MESOPOTAMIA
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The Development of Writing

For most of human history, every story, law, and memory survived only as long as people could remember it. In some cultures, trained storytellers such as griots memorized vast amounts of information and shared it through performance. The system worked, but it depended on memory—and memory could fail.

As Sumerian city-states such as Uruk grew, people began to take on specialized jobs. Some workers made pots, others baked bread, while farmers grew crops. No one could produce everything they needed, so they depended on one another. But in some places, the system was becoming too complicated to rely on memory.

The Need to Keep Records

As food and goods poured into temple storehouses, workers lined up to receive their share. Someone had to keep track—who brought what, who received what, and what was left. Memory was no longer enough.

The First Writing: Pictographs

About 5,000 years ago, record keepers began pressing drawings into soft clay. These early symbols were pictures of the goods they tracked. A farmer might bring sacks of grain to the storehouse. A record keeper would press a picture of grain into a clay tablet and add marks to show the amount. This kind of writing is called pictographic writing.

Pictographs worked well for counting goods, but as city life grew more complex, they were no longer enough. A simple drawing could show "ten jars of grain," but it could not show a person's name, a promise, or an idea.

From Pictures to Sounds

Using English sounds, we can see how this works. Imagine a name written with two symbols: a tree and a stone. The symbols are not meant to show a tree or a stone. Instead, they stand for their sounds. A reader might understand the symbols as the name Treestone, Triston, or something close. The symbols do not exactly represent the name, but they provide enough clues to figure it out.

Imagine carving a tree into clay. At first, you draw a trunk, branches, maybe even leaves. The next time, you leave out the leaves. Then you reduce it to a trunk with a few short lines. Soon, it becomes two or three quick marks scratched into the clay. It no longer looks like a tree, but the writer and reader still understand the sound it represents.

Phonetic Writing

Writing systems often begin with pictographs but become far more flexible when symbols represent sounds. This is called phonetic writing. Phonetic writing uses a small set of symbols to form many different words. In modern English, the letters D-O-G form the word "dog." Using the same letters, a writer can form other words, such as "dig" or "god." With phonetic writing, a person can write a name like "David," record a promise, or send a message to someone far away.

Cuneiform

The Sumerians kept their records by making marks on flat pieces of soft clay called tablets. They pressed their symbols into the clay using a pointed reed. Tablets could be baked until they hardened and became permanent. Later scholars named this writing cuneiform, from a Latin word meaning "wedge-shaped," because the pointed reed made tiny wedge marks in the clay.

The Impact of Writing

As writing became more flexible, people could record much more than goods and numbers. Writers could preserve stories like the Epic of Gilgamesh, and rulers such as Hammurabi could have their laws written down and shared across their kingdoms. Writing allowed people to record ideas, communicate across distances, and preserve knowledge for future generations. What began as a way to keep track of grain and labor became one of the most important inventions in human history.

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Fill in the Blanks

For most of human history, people relied on m__mo__y to preserve stories, laws, and knowledge. As S__m__ri__n city-states grew, specialized workers depended on one another, and economies became too complicated to rely on memory alone. About 5,000 years ago, record keepers began using pictographs—simple d__a__i__gs pressed into c_____ tablets—to track goods. As needs grew, Su__e__i__n writing evolved from pictures to s__m__o__s that represented sounds. This p__o__e__ic writing allowed people to record names, ideas, and messages. The Sumerians used a system later called c__n__i__o__m, made by pressing wedge-shaped marks into clay. Writing made it possible to preserve laws, literature, and knowledge for future g__n__r__t__o__s.

Answer in Complete Sentences

1. Explain why the Sumerians first needed to write.

2. Hy is Sumerian writing called cuneiform?

*3. What can phonetic writing communicate better than pictographs?

Pictographs

Draw two or more pictographs to illustrate each name. They start easy and become more challenging. Use your creativity to think of answers others in class may understand.

Rainbow Sun	Tony	Madison	Mako

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