

First Alphabets

By Allan Haley

PEOPLE HAVE ALWAYS FELT THE NEED – and found a way – to record the details of their lives. The process of developing alphabets began quite simply, though the first messages weren't actually "writing" as we know it. Rather, they were simple tokens: a flower left outside someone's hut symbolizing a tender sentiment, a pile of rocks along a trail warning of danger. Slowly, however, these tokens and signs evolved into marks.

The marks were the beginning of written communication. They had to be simple and well shaped, so each could be recognized consistently for its unique meaning. From its earliest beginnings, writing was an art.

inadequate for expressing abstractions, and difficult for keeping records or creating documents. To overcome these shortcomings, new writing systems required a reduction in form, as well as an expansion of meaning.

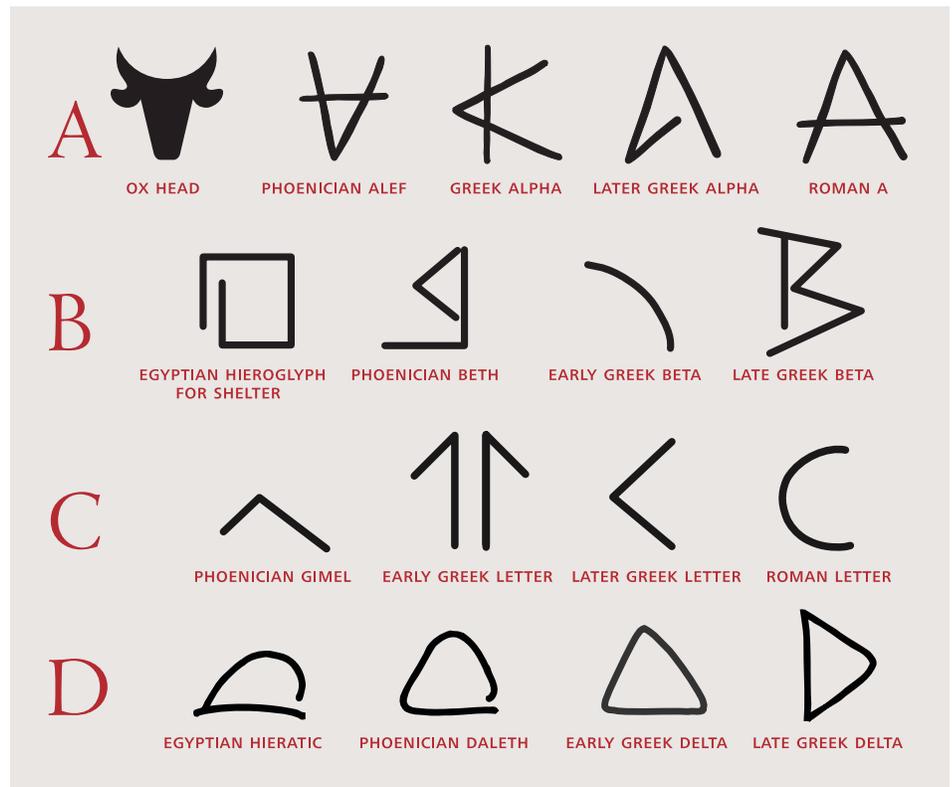
Phonograms

The Egyptians were probably the first to break with the tradition of simple symbol writing. At first, they used "sound pictures" to represent words and syllables with the same or similar sound.

Symbol Alphabets

The first writings were graphic images that represented something tangible. These were normally very simple shapes that spoke to a rather simple vocabulary: man, woman, fire, food, tree, etc. Over time, people realized that they needed more symbols to express more words. So, multiple "tree" symbols were combined to make a "forest," and the separate symbols for man, woman, and child were consolidated into a single "family" symbol.

The limitations of writing with symbols were plain: it took too many symbols to express a complicated, sophisticated thought. As culture and society became increasingly complex – propelled by the mechanisms of agriculture, religion, and politics – graphic forms of expression were developed to respond to their demands. Earlier symbol writing, which referred to specific things or ideas, was



Design progression of letterforms.

First Alphabets (con't)

Then, over thousands of years, they began to use “phonograms” (sound pictures) to only represent syllables. The phonograms were strung together to create a word. Eventually Egyptian writing evolved into the hieratic script commonly known as hieroglyphics. A popular variant, Demotic script was widely used for academic, business and religious documents. These scripts set the stage for the creation of alphabets throughout the nation-states encircling the Mediterranean.

Phonetic Writing

The Phoenicians brought about the next evolutionary step. They were businessmen–traders, the forerunners of modern entrepreneurs. They put cash down in Egypt, traded in Crete, and sold in Athens – usually at a profit. The Phoenicians clearly had a need for an alphabet, but not for the graceful, decorative alphabet of the Egyptians.

The Phoenicians were concerned with record keeping and little else. As a result, Phoenician writing was free of frills, easy to read, and quick to write. Phoenician writing was also purely alphabetic – one character equaled one sound. This was the first phonetic alphabet.

Our Alphabet Emerges

In the process of doing business in Greece, the Phoenicians also passed on their alphabet. Once again, the Western alphabet began to change. The Greeks added vowels, new characters, and curves. The beauty of our present alphabet began to take shape.

The Latin alphabet was derived from Greek letterforms by way of the Etruscans, who were indigenous to the Italian peninsula. The Romans adopted and adjusted the Greek alphabet in much the same confident way they adopted and adjusted to the Greek

gods. They developed their own style and characters based on the Greek foundation.

Roman Capitals

Roman capital letters grew out of signage. They are the formal letterforms that were carved into monuments and buildings, and used for important manuscripts. Even though these letters were carved in stone, they reflect the same principles as handwritten letters. Our typefaces are curved, with thick and thin graduations of stroke, because writing by hand with flat-tipped utensils shaped ancient letters this way. The Roman capitals have had, and still continue to exert, the greatest influence on both the design and the use of capital letters. They have remained the classic standard of proportion and dignity for over 2,000 years. ■