

# **The Story of the Ox and the House**

## **(The Story of Communication in Written Signs)**

### **MATERIALS:**

- Moveable alphabet (or a list of the letters of the alphabet)
- Charts (you can draw your own based on the pictures in this lesson)

### **PRESENTATION:**

What have we got here? Our alphabet (the moveable alphabet). WE have all the letters that make up our alphabet – there are 26. I think we should say ONLY 26, because that's really very few. Just think, with just these 26 letters/signs, we can make all the words of our language. Do you know how many there are? See this encyclopedia, and all the books in our library and all the books in the English language use just the 26 letters. From the very shortest word that's to be found in our language, which perhaps is just one letter long, to the longest word, which could be made up of 20 or more letters... Regardless of how long or short they are, they are made up of these signs. You already know something about the shapes and sounds of these letters. But do you know where they come from? Do you think we, or your parents, invented them? No, we didn't. Do you think your grandparents or the people of the United States of long ago invented them? No.

Let's go back longer... The Romans or Greeks? No. We have to go back even longer to understand how we came to inherit these letters. So I want to tell you a story called *"The Story of the Ox and the House"*. (Put the letters aside but not away).

Let's think back to a long time ago, before the beginning of our story. We know that human beings evolved after the Earth had existed for a very long time. When they evolved, from a physical point of view they were really very poor: not very strong, naked without fur coats, no sharp teeth or claws... But we have talked about how they did come with some very special gifts: A special mind for thinking, imagining, wondering, questioning; a special love that means we can care about what happens to people we don't even know; and a special gift – the hands. How can we do everything we do without our hands?

But there is something else that is so very special about human beings. We can talk, just like I am talking right now. I can tell you how I feel as well, and you can do the same. We can communicate through words, through speaking.

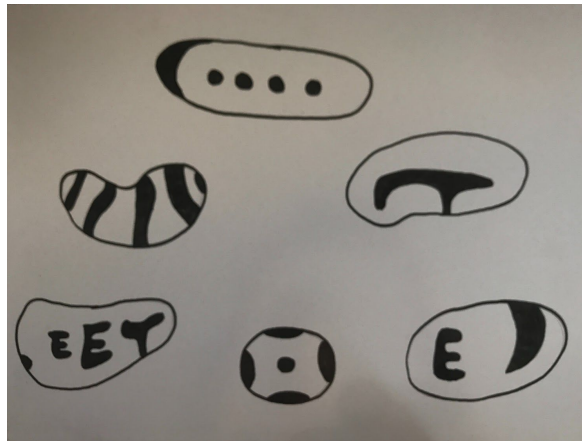
(Note to adults: We go back to before written language because we want to bring in spoken language as a gift.)

Long before anything was written down, people were already using spoken language. We know this – remember the timeline of the Hand. Generations and generations of humans were speaking without putting down their thoughts in writing. But of course just being able to speak to one another was absolutely wonderful.

However, there were surely situations that could arise where someone had to go away but desperately needed to speak to someone who was not there. Could they phone? No! There were

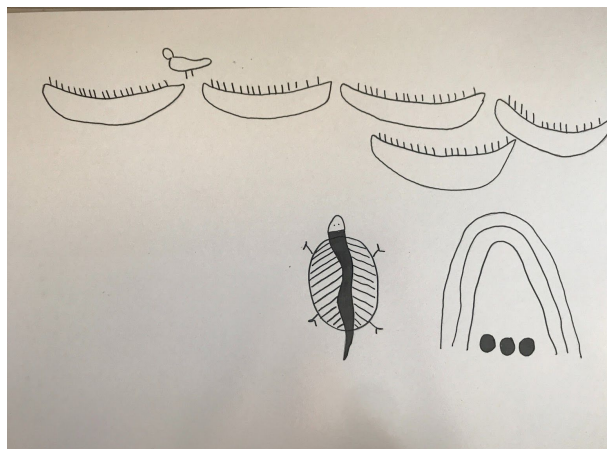
no papers or pencils and they didn't know how to write. How could they leave a message? We can also imagine situations where someone wants to leave a message that's important to a whole group. How could they record a message?

Perhaps in the beginning they used objects for leaving messages. What could they use? Stones, pebbles, feathers... Everyone would know what that meant. Perhaps a certain number of stones could be left to say how many unfriendly people were around in their territory. The interesting thing is that we have found painted pebbles; here are some examples (show chart of pebbles).



They're very interesting, but we don't know what they mean! They are very old; they go back to the Stone Age times. Do you think they look that old or do they look modern to you? The sad thing is that we don't know what they mean or what they're saying. But people who study them think they do have meanings. Perhaps they are messages, but we don't know what they are saying.

Then we think that people started to use pictures. Instead of using objects and painting on them, they started to make pictures. There are a number of reasons why people might want to create a message. We can imagine a situation in which it is very important for the safety of one's friends that we create a message. But other times we might want to leave a message for our children or grandchildren about something that has already happened. That's what we see here (show chart).



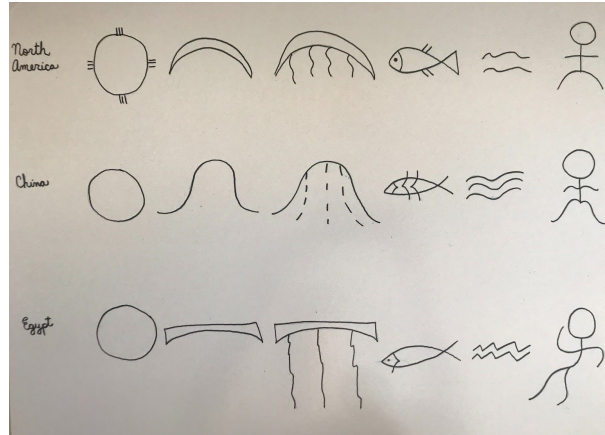
It is not so easy to understand, is it? This particular message was found painted on a rock, and it is made to remember something that took place. It is about an expedition that was made across a large lake in North America. It is telling us that the expedition was made up of a certain number of canoes – five. We can also count how many men there are in each canoe. The first canoe was guided by the chief of the tribe, whose totem was the Kingfisher. The expedition lasted three days. Can you see the painting and recognize the three days? We can see the three suns telling us it's three days. Can you find the tortoise or land turtle? That tells us that the people on the expedition came safely back to land. They crossed the lake and came back to land.

Do you think you would have been able to understand all of that without me giving you an explanation? No. But it is a message that was left for people who weren't present at the expedition so that everyone could remember this success. Now let's look at another example of these early types of messages. (Show the image of the moose hunters.)



Try to think about what that is saying. Look at the first man: he has an arm up and he has an outstretched arm. He has three outstretched fingers, which says: We three men are going away (act it out with your arms) to hunt animals. Can you see they're going to hunt animals? We're going away for three days, three good-byes. And then we're coming back (point out the men's arms).

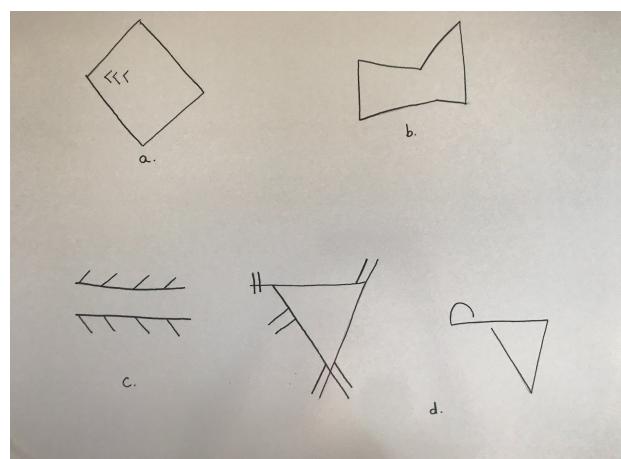
This way of remembering events and leaving messages is being done through pictures. We can think of it as picture writing, which was done in many different parts of the world. When people couldn't write in the way we think of writing, they could use this picture writing. They were trying to communicate through pictures. What is really interesting also is that even though you find all these human groups in different parts of the world, often the pictures were rather similar. (Show the chart, covering the two bottom rows with a sheet of paper to isolate the drawings in the top row).



The top row refers to North America and this is how they represented these items. The middle row is how they were doing it in China, and at the bottom in Egypt. However, they look very similar, and that's because they were drawing what they observed. We can all observe the sun, or rain, or fish, or each other. What they were observing is similar so what they drew is similar, too.

But as time went by, people were really not satisfied with this way of communicating. After all, how much information can we pass on in this manner? Then, think of all the time that it takes to draw all these pictures. In other words, it's clear that people wanted to express more in less time. So these pictures started to look not like objects but started to represent ideas.

If I want to represent a year, is that an object? No, it's more like an idea. And then again, in the interest of doing all of this faster and using less time, do I always have to draw so carefully and beautifully? Over time, people wanted to draw more than objects and wanted to produce them faster, so the drawings started to look less like drawings and more and more stylized, and the original objects became harder to recognize. This type of drawing also depends on the kinds of instruments that people used. I want to show you an example (show Sumerian chart).



The pictures are identified by letters so we can tell them apart. We can agree that these drawings are signs that have become so stylized that we can't really think of them as pictures. Also, they are expressing ideas. These were made by Sumerians (note: chances are that this is the first time the

children have heard of Sumerians, so you might want to give some information). The Sumerians were a people who lived a long time ago; not as long ago as the Stone Age, but still a very long time ago. They are an ancient civilization that lived in the part of the world that we now call the Middle East, on a plane between two rivers. That land was called Mesopotamia, which means “between two rivers”.

Just imagine, this is a river plane, so there’s a lot of clay. So when they wanted to record something, they used tablets made of clay. They would press into the clay with a special sort of stick or reed called a “stylus”. It has a special shape on the end, it is triangular and it was prepared by the Sumerians. Using this instrument means that their drawing or writing became simpler and simpler until at the end it was a series of triangular shapes or wedges. Because of this, Sumerian writing is called Cuneiform, or wedge-shaped writing.

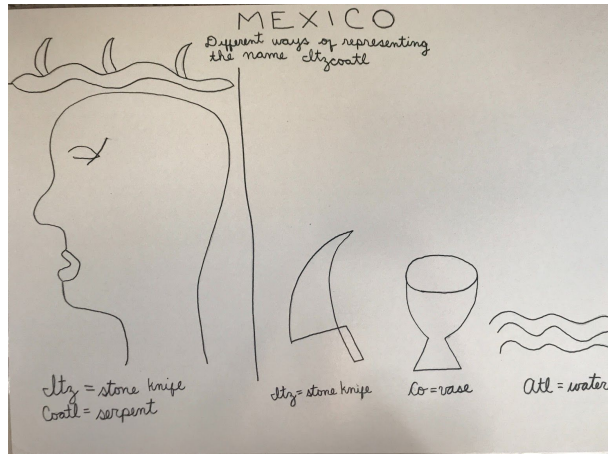
After they used this special stick to make signs in the soft clay, they would bake the tablets. Then the tablets became very hard. Those tablets have lasted so well and so long that we can still find them to this day. So many have been found that people speak of libraries of these tablets. Now let’s try and understand what these particular signs mean. The first one (a) is meant to be a circle representing the sun. What does it look like now? A square. Inside, what can you see? Three wedge shapes. Each one is their sign for ten, so three of them refer to 30. What does 30 suns mean? 30 days. What is 30 days? One month, so that sign is what they used for one month.

Let’s look at the next one (b). What does it look like? A boot? If we’re moving, this is what our boot looks like (walk), but if we’re not going anywhere, this is what our boot looks like (put foot on table). This is their sign for “to stay”. It’s like we’ve come home and we’re relaxing; we’re staying at home – we put our feet up.

Let’s look at the third one (c). It means an opening. It reminds me of a zipper, but zippers didn’t exist back then. I won’t tell you what the meaning of the last one is; you can explore it by yourself if you’re interested.

Now we want to go to a completely different place; let’s zoom away from Sumeria and go to Mexico.

In Mexico, a long time ago, there was an ancient civilization known as the Aztecs. Back in those long-ago times, there was a particular individual who was quite well known and whose name was Itzcoatl. (show chart)



"Itz" means "knife"; "coatl" means "serpent". So what did his name mean? "Knife serpent". Look at the head of the man; it has a serpent and out of the serpent three stone blades stick out, which is what their knives were like.

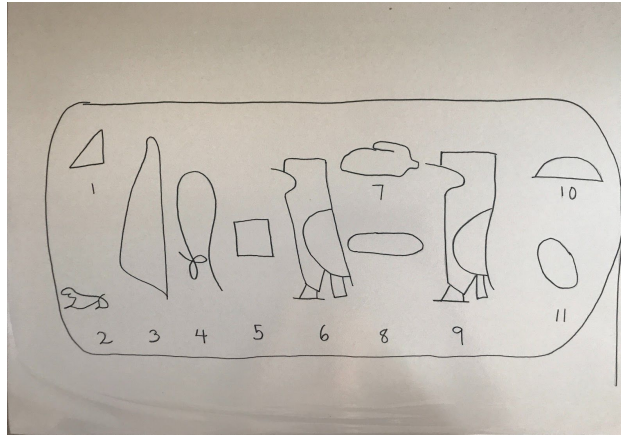
With this word "coatl" the Aztecs realized that if they broke down "coatl" into "co" and "atl", "co" meant "pot" and "atl" meant "water". So they realized that they could represent this man's name by having a picture of the knife (Itz), a little pot (co), and a picture of water (atl). However, if you look at the first drawing, you could clearly see that he's named "knife serpent", while in the second part you cannot understand what his name means unless you understand the spoken language.

This is the first time when people connect their picture writing with the words as they are spoken. The reason they could do this is because their word for serpent could be broken into smaller words.

Now let's look at examples from our language. (Draw: an eye, a wave (sea), two birds, a fly. The children can "read" the pictures as "I see birds fly.")

We only understand this because we know English and we know the word that's associated with each picture. (another example: pen+man+ship). It seems like a simple game of playing with words, and yet connecting pictures with words a long time ago was a very large step in written language.

Around the same time of the Sumerians, there was another great group of people who developed an important civilization. They were called the Egyptians. (show hieroglyphs chart).



They lived along the banks of a very important and very long river called the River Nile. They also had all sorts of pictures and signs, which were called hieroglyphs. They painted them on walls and on wood and they also discovered a plant that they could use for painting on – papyrus. They would paint on the papyrus using brushes and ink. Their signs also looked like pictures, and some of these are very easy to recognize.

The Egyptians loved their pictures and when they carved them or painted them – when they drew them, their execution was very careful. These kinds of signs were their oldest kind of writing. Hieroglyph means “sacred carving” (comes from Greek). The signs we see here were signs that helped people to understand hieroglyphs. They were used for a long time, even after a different kind of writing was invented. But after a while, people forgot what they meant, so it became a secret that had to be discovered all over again.

The people who worked on unlocking the secret of the hieroglyph realized that this set of drawings is the name of an important Egyptian queen: Cleopatra. When they realized that this series of drawings stood for her name, they were then able to figure out what each symbol meant. Maybe you can also figure it out. The signs at the end meant the name was of a female. The name was circled, which meant that it was the name of someone very important, either a god or royalty.

What we understand from this set of signs is that they used them for sounds, or for parts of words, and even for whole words (for example: female). This special picture writing really served various purposes.

Now we want to learn about a different group of people – the Phoenicians. They were great sailors and traders; they were merchants. They sailed around the Mediterranean Sea and they were such expert sailors that they knew the Mediterranean Sea very well and could sail to Africa, Europe and Asia. They were very busy carrying all sorts of things on their ships from one place to another. They traded many precious things: ivory, silk, jewelry, and papyrus. Mostly they were carrying things but didn’t produce many things themselves. There was something that they sold that came from their own land: it was a dye used for coloring cloth, and this dye was much sought after. It was called Tyrian Purple, although it was really more red than purple. Tyrian comes from the name of one of their cities: Tyre.



Many people thought the most important thing about the Phoenicians was the trading and the dye, but we know there's something else that's important as well. As sailors, they came into contact with many different people. They were familiar with the Egyptians and others. They were very busy people and didn't have much spare time. They also wanted to keep precise and accurate records and wanted to have lists of what they were selling and buying. They needed a quick and simple way to record, so they came up with a very important idea – pictures of signs should be used only for sounds. There are only a comparatively few sounds in any language, so they would only need a few sounds. They developed their own writing system, which at first did look like pictures but it was sound writing. All their signs looked like pictures, but they're not representing whole words or ideas. They're just representing individual sounds. They had 22 sounds, ONLY 22.

If we think of using pictures that represent ideas, we could have thousands and thousands of different pictures, so when the Phoenicians came up with only 22 signs, that really made things very simple by comparison. The pictures they used were of everyday things, but they only used them as sounds, and because they were interested in saving time, they signs became very simple (stylized). They were hard to distinguish as pictures after a while. Let's look at some of their signs.

They used a sign that started off as the head of an ox (a V with a horizontal line across) and then they started turning the V to different positions (sideways or upside-down). You have to think what sound that was standing for... I'll tell you in a minute!

They also had a stylized drawing of a house, a picture of a camel, a door, and so on... Over time, the details were lost so it looks like some sign that we don't understand anymore. The Phoenician word for ox was "halef". Let's look at the signs (go over a few of them with the children. [Link to print this picture](#)).

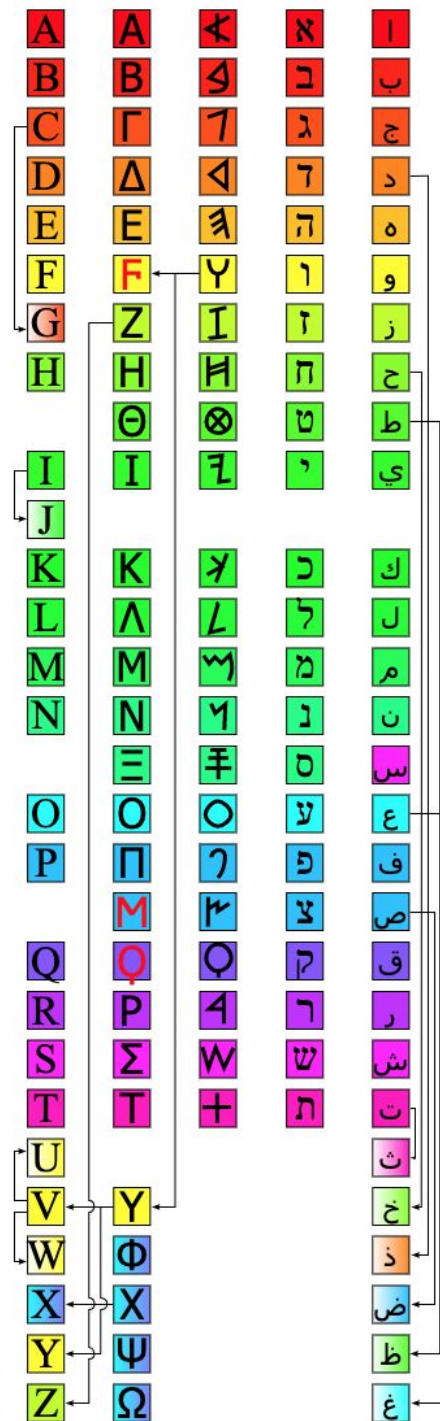


They always took the first sound of each word and gave it to that symbol, so the first sound of "halef" was "h"; they didn't think "beth" (house), they thought "b", and so on.

They weren't just trading with the Egyptians; they were also trading with the Greeks. The Greeks thought this was a great system, so they took the system but they couldn't use the same signs



because they were very different spoken languages. The Greeks forgot all about the ox and the house. They took the signs but they forgot what they stood for. They didn't call the first sign "halef", they called it "alpha". They didn't call the second sign "beth", they called it "beta". They used "alpha" and "beta" as the name for the entire system of signs. What can you hear in "alpha" and "beta"? "Alphabet"! So when we say "alphabet", we are saying "ox and house". (link to chart [here](#).)



Did we get our alphabet from the Greeks? No, because they didn't even remember it came from ox and house. Others thought this was a fabulous idea, including the Romans. They got the Phoenician sounds from the Greeks and adapted this to their own language. Every time the signs passed to a different people, they adapted the needs to their own language. What's amazing is that they all used most of these signs that originally came from the Phoenicians, and sometimes they invented their own. (Note: At this point, the children should already know the difference between a consonant and a vowel).

We said that all Phoenician signs were used for sounds, and virtually all for isolated sounds. But those sounds were all for consonants. Can you give me some examples of consonants? "h", "b", "g", "d", etc... There must have been something special about Phoenician language that allowed them to do that, but it didn't work for the Greeks. They needed signs for the vowels too, so they changed some of these signs, not in terms of what they looked like but in terms of what they were used for. The "h" of the Phoenicians became the "a" of the Greeks. Sometimes they modified the signs and sometimes they came up with their own.

We can all agree that because the Greeks completed the alphabet, we can say that they added the "music" to the alphabet. What did the Romans contribute? They contributed the rounding of the letters, which made the signs more beautiful. We can follow each letter on this chart from the Phoenicians to the Greeks to the Romans to us. If you can't do that with all of them, then you can research to find out why this is.

What kind of letters are these (modern)? They are capital letters. If you want to know how we got our small letters, that's another story. For now, we just want to remember the general story of our alphabet that led to these letters. We can think of the Romans who rounded the letters, the Greeks who added the music to the letters, and those who had the idea in the first place who had the idea in the first place of using symbols only for sounds – the Phoenicians.

But we can say that the roots of our alphabet go back even further than the Phoenicians. Instead of having hundreds or thousands of pictures we have just these 26 letters. (bring back the moveable alphabet). What is interesting is that whenever we use this (take out an a, then a b) now you know that what we are using is the ox and the house. And you also now know what a long story this is. It's a story that tells us how we got our few powerful signs, signs that stand for sounds and that we can use for sending messages all around the world. We use them to speak silently, to overcome the obstacle of distance, and when we read we also overcome the barrier of time – we can hear someone speak from a long time ago. These signs have made the writer immortal.