mystery science

Grades K-5
Mini-Lesson: “Who invented the alphabet?”

VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

VIDEO 1

[Video Call]

- Hi, Doug!
- Hi, Jahid!
- I have a question for you. Who invented the alphabet?
- Ooh, that's a great question.

Who invented the alphabet? I think one of the things that makes this such an interesting question is the whole idea that there wasn't always an alphabet. Today, we have both speaking and writing, so it's tempting to think we've always had both, but we haven't always had writing. We had speaking first. Isn't that interesting? Someone had to invent the alphabet. Someone had to come up with the very idea of writing.

Stop and think about that for a second. How would your life be different if there were no such thing as writing?

VIDEO 2

Just imagine what life would've been like before we had any way to write. There would've been no text messages, for sure. No writing letters or notes to your friends. No books—and whoa,

think about that! That would mean no way to learn or share from anyone who wasn't talking right next to you.

Once writing was invented, it must've been mind-blowing for someone to see writing for the first time. They might've said, "Wait, wait, we can all speak, but this here—these are symbols for what we speak—something written down? Something you can hold and take with you? That's weird!" It might've seemed almost like magic.

Think about it. Now, people would be able to send each other messages from faraway places. They could even send messages to the future—writing down important stories, memories, or things they'd learned, to help make sure it wouldn't be forgotten.

So, who came up with all of this? Who invented the alphabet?

Well, for starters, you might be interested to know that there's not just one way of writing. There's not just one alphabet. There are actually a lot of different alphabets used by different languages. These ways of writing use different symbols than the symbols we use in our alphabet.

For example, in the Korean alphabet, the symbol for the letter S—the “ss” sound—looks like this. The symbol for the H sound—”huh,” “huh”—looks like this. These are just two examples, and you can see how different these are from the symbols used in the alphabet we use in English.

Or, in the way of writing used in many parts of India, called Devanagari, the symbol for the “ah” sound looks like this. The symbol for the “ba” sound looks like this, and more.

In fact, many of these alphabets use not just different symbols, but totally different ways of writing. For example, in Arabic writing, it's always written from right to left, the opposite direction that we write when we write in English.

Or, in some languages, like Chinese, Japanese, and Korean, it's possible to write not just side to side, which they do, but also up and down, which sometimes writers in these languages will do. You can find a lot of books written that way.

Some languages, like Chinese, even use a completely different way of writing, where many of the symbols aren't sounds at all, but instead stand for entire words. For example, this symbol is the symbol for the word home, or this one is the symbol for the word cat. Because of the way that Chinese writing uses symbols for words rather than sounds, becoming a master of reading and writing in Chinese takes a lot of years. It's considered a great accomplishment.

But what about the alphabet that we use in English? How did it get invented, and by whom?

Well, most historians—the people who study the past—think that the credit for inventing the alphabet belongs to an ancient group of people called the Phoenicians. It's thought that thousands of years ago, the Phoenicians came up with the idea of using symbols to stand for sounds. This symbol for the “ah” sound, this symbol for the “ba” sound, and so on.

Then another group of people, the ancient Greeks, heard of this idea and borrowed it—making their own symbols, symbols that were similar, but not exactly like the Phoenicians' ones.

In fact, the names of the first two letters of the Greek alphabet reveal something interesting. The letter for the “ah” sound in the Greek alphabet is named *alpha*. The letter for the “ba” sound in

the Greek alphabet is named *beta*. Alpha, beta—you see why this way of writing started to be called an *alphabet*?

But these letters of the Greek alphabet still look a little unfamiliar. They're not quite like the letters you're used to in English.

There's one last piece to this story—and that's the ancient Romans. They took the Greek alphabet and made their own symbols, ones that looked more like this. Look familiar? This is the same alphabet that we use in English.

Because these exact shapes of the letters we use were created by the ancient Romans, sometimes we call our alphabet the *Roman alphabet*, and English definitely isn't the only language to use the Roman alphabet. Lots of other languages use the same alphabet to stand for the sounds of their languages—including Spanish, German, French, and many more.

So in summary, our alphabet that we use in English—the Roman alphabet—was inspired by the ancient Phoenicians, a group of people who invented the first alphabet thousands of years ago. But the letters of our alphabet are not the only way of writing. You can be on the lookout for some of the world's other alphabets and other ways of writing.

That's all for this week's question. Thanks, Jahid, for asking it!