



EMORY

MICHAEL C.  
CARLOS  
MUSEUM

carlos.emory.edu



# classroom TUTORIALS

## Scribes and Writing in Ancient Egypt



The scribe Ramessesnakht

**W**riting was a special skill that few people in ancient Egypt possessed. Only one percent of the population could read and write. These people, known as scribes, included royalty and high officials of state and, below them, people for whom the ability to read and write was a necessary part of their job. Scribes were needed in every area of the country's administration—from the civil service, to the military, to the vast religious hierarchy.

The life of a scribe was very desirable; it assured a position of status and offered the opportunity for advancement. An ancient text explains, “Be a scribe so that your limbs may become sleek, that your hands may become soft, that you may go forth, admired, in white attire and that courtiers may salute you.” Scribes did not have to participate in manual labor and were exempt from taxes.

Training in scribal skills was essential for anyone with professional or political aspirations. Basic skills were taught in schools that were often attached to temples. More advanced training was acquired on the job through the apprentice system. Very few women seem to have been literate, although we do know that Cleopatra penned her own documents. Boys who were to become scribes generally began their training at a young age, as early as seven, and trained for at least five years.

Texts from the New Kingdom indicate that basic reading and writing was learned by copying excerpts from well-known texts. School assignments survive on scraps of papyrus, wooden tablets, and most commonly, limestone chips or pottery fragments called *ostraca*. The practice paragraphs were taken from well-known popular narratives about heroes and adventures, or from passages detailing the advantages of being a scribe. One student text on papyrus in the British Museum reads, “Apply yourself to writing zealously; do not stay your hand... pleasant and wealth abounding is your palette and your roll of papyrus.”

Hieroglyphs were letters not pictograms, though hieroglyphs may have evolved from them. The language was a complex one since there were hieroglyphs for single-letter sounds, double-letter sounds, and triple-letter sounds. Since, as in many living Semitic languages such as Arabic and Hebrew, the vowels were not written, we have to guess at their pronunciation. This is why you see the boy king's name spelled Tutankhamun, Tutankhamen, and Tutankhamon. The lack of vowels made different words look similar so that additional signs, called determinatives, were used to clarify their meaning.

Writing first appeared in Egypt just before the beginning of the First Dynasty and by the beginning of the Middle Kingdom there were some seven hundred signs in common use. By the Late Period, there were more than a thousand. Because the ability to read and write was greatly admired, high officials and even princes had statues made depicting themselves as scribes, seated in a cross legged position with a scribal palette and a roll of papyrus opened on their lap.

## classroom TUTORIALS **Scribes and Writing in Ancient Egypt**



The patron god of the scribes was Thoth, who could be depicted as a baboon, an ibis, or an ibis-headed person holding a scribal palette. In the statue of the scribe Ramessesnakht (seen on page one) featured in *Tutankhamun: The Golden King and the Great Pharaohs*, a baboon is perched on the shoulders of the scribe and peers over the top of his head. This image indicates that the god Thoth is not quite a separate entity from the figure of Ramessenakht, as there is no space separating the baboon god and the scribe. In Egyptian art, if a god was depicted emerging from a person's head then it meant that god's soul (*ba*) was residing in the person's earthly body.

The image of Ramessesnakht is one of an official hard at work with a papyrus scroll on his lap. The ornate pleats on Ramessesnakht's outfit further illustrate his elite status. Ramessesnakht is also shown with careworn facial features reflecting his mature age. The lines underneath his chest represent fat rolls, a sign that he was wealthy enough to enjoy an abundant supply of food.

Scribes had a number of specialized tools called a scribal kit. This kit included a scribal palette—a rectangular board made of wood, ivory, or stone with two wells for red and black ink, and sometimes a slot for sharpened reeds. The kit also included a burnishing stone for smoothing the surface of the papyrus before writing, and a water container—either a pot or a shell—for wetting the cakes of ink. The hieroglyph for the word “scribe” is a drawing of a scribal kit and a man (see illustration below). A model of a scribal palette was included in Tutankhamun's tomb. The “cakes of ink” in this model are actually red and black stones. The area around the stones is carved to create the shen sign, a symbol of eternity. Grooves carved into the palette indicate where reed pens would have been placed as the scribe worked.

### What did the Egyptians write on?

When scribes were learning or practicing to write they often used broken pottery sherds or smooth pieces of stone called *ostraca*.

For formal documents papyrus was used. Papyrus was made by cutting strips from the pith of the papyrus plant. These piths were then layered on top of each other at right angles and soaked until natural adhesives in the plant fiber bound the strips together. The papyrus was then pressed, dried, and smoothed with a rock or shell to create a smooth writing surface.

LEFT  
Scribal palette from  
Tutankhamun's tomb

RIGHT  
The hieroglyph for  
the word “scribe”  
is a drawing of a  
scribal kit and a  
man.

