

Timeline of Writing Systems' Graphical Evolution

Modern Era (timescale change)

East Asia

Legend

Hellenic: Scripts derived from Greek

Chinese: Scripts derived from Oracle Bone

Northern Brahmi: Scripts derived from Brahmi in North India

Southern Brahmi: Scripts derived from Brahmi in South India

Semitic: Scripts derived from Proto-Sinaitic

Other: Independently derived scripts (graphically)

Bold: Over 10 million users

Bold underline: Over 100 million users

Italics: Not in Unicode

Script extinction then revival:

▼ ▲ ↔ Writing direction

文 Logograph: Words are distinct characters

カ Syllabary: Syllables are distinct characters

ㄱ ㄷ Alphabets: Consonants are distinct characters

◻ True alphabet: Vowels are on par with consonants

◻ Abugida: Vowels are secondary, usually diacritics

◻ Abjad: Vowels are optional or non-existent

Southeast Asia

South Asia

Central & West Asia

Africa

Europe, Anatolia & Caucasus

Americas

The timeline illustrates the graphical evolution of writing systems from 2000 BC to 2000 AD. It is organized into five main regional sections, each with a distinct background color and a detailed branching diagram of writing systems.

- East Asia (Light Purple):** Shows the evolution of Chinese scripts from Oracle Bone (2000 BC) through various forms like Seal Script, Clerical, and Regular/Traditional Chinese (Hanzi/Kanji/Hanja/Chu Han) to Simplified Chinese and Hangeul. It also includes Japanese scripts (Katakana, Hiragana, Kanji) and Korean Hangul.
- Southeast Asia (Light Blue):** Features scripts like Kawi, which branches into many local languages including Javanese, Balinese, and various Thai and Vietnamese scripts. It also shows the influence of Indian scripts like Tamil and Pali.
- South Asia (Light Green):** Traces the lineage from Brahmi through various regional scripts like Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, and Odia, showing how they adapted to local languages and needs.
- Central & West Asia (Light Orange):** Focuses on Semitic scripts, starting from Proto-Sinaitic and evolving through Phoenician, Aramaic, and Hebrew to Arabic and Persian. It also includes other regional scripts like Syriac and Georgian.
- Africa (Light Yellow):** Displays the evolution of African scripts, including Egyptian Hieroglyphs, Hieratic, and various Berber and Amharic scripts, showing their unique development and some influences from other regions.
- Europe, Anatolia & Caucasus (Light Blue):** Shows the development of European scripts from Greek and Latin, through various medieval and modern forms like Gothic, Fraktur, and various national alphabets (Cyrillic, Latin, Greek, etc.).
- Americas (Light Green):** Highlights indigenous writing systems like Mayan and Aztec, as well as the development of the Cherokee syllabary and the influence of European missionaries on local scripts.

The legend provides essential information for interpreting the diagram:

- Color Coding:** Hellenic (Purple), Chinese (Pink), Northern Brahmi (Light Blue), Southern Brahmi (Light Green), Semitic (Orange), Other (Yellow).
- Line Style:** Bold (Over 10 million users), Bold Underline (Over 100 million users), Italic (Not in Unicode).
- Script Status:** Script extinction then revival (dashed line), True alphabet (vowels on par with consonants), Abugida (vowels secondary), Abjad (vowels optional/non-existent).
- Writing Direction:** Indicated by arrows (▼ for top-to-bottom, ▲ for bottom-to-top, ↔ for left-to-right).
- Script Type:** Logograph (words are distinct characters), Syllabary (syllables are distinct characters), Alphabet (consonants are distinct characters), True alphabet (vowels on par with consonants), Abugida (vowels secondary), Abjad (vowels optional/non-existent).