

# The Evolution of Communication

To understand communication, one must look to history. History provides a window to see into the civilizations of the past: how they lived, how they communicated, how they helped language evolve. Through this lens, we can also see how civilizations have evolved. The evolution of societies from the spoken to the written word is vast, moving from close and dependent to independent and fast-paced.

## Cuneiform as the first language

The first written language, cuneiform, began somewhere around the 4th century BCE in Mesopotamia. It is widely attributed to the peoples of Sumer, although it could be older. This language was essentially tick marks made by a reed stylus and placed in various positions on clay tablets. This made it possible for the stories of humanity to have visual and historical weight. Before this time, language was a collection of stories passed from person to person. These stories were not tangible. They were temporary and ever-changing. This first language captured their physical presence and purpose. It allowed thoughts and ideas to be recorded for future growth.

The Sumerians were a people known for farming, textiles, and pottery among other trades. It would stand to reason that the communities of Sumer were tightly woven together as they most likely were dependent on one another. This also probably means that their language was tightly woven into each other... They most likely all spoke the same, all had similar ideas and experiences to one another and shared the same mythological stories. Writing down these ideas and myths would lend itself to growth in Sumerian culture. They could now have a written record of the weather in a particular season or they could better keep track of their financial dealings with traders at the markets. But also, the people of Sumer would find themselves to be the trailblazers of an entire new pillar of the world—the written word.

## The age of living books

The ancient Egyptians used the pith of the papyrus plant to make their paper. The Greco-Romans began using parchment, or the skin of animals that was rolled out into thin sheets that could be used for writing and then rolled up into scrolls. Vellum, also a new invention, was also created from the membrane of animals. These are all examples of the first type of paper created with one idea in mind—the growth of civilization.

The Egyptians were farmers and traders, but they were also innovators. The language that they left behind on the Rosetta Stone (a large piece of granodiorite with the same text in Greek, Demotic, and Hieroglyphic languages) would be of great help to historians for a long time to come. The Egyptians left their mark mainly with the larger-than-life pyramids they constructed, but also with their mythology and culture—which we know all about due to the written word.

The Romans would leave a much larger mark on civilization as they were conquerors. They had a small number of their own deities and mythology, and what they lacked in that regard, they stole from the Greeks. They built, pillaged, plundered, and eventually fell. The United States is a prime example of what the Romans left behind, as our socio-economic structure, architecture, and laws are modeled after those of the Roman world. An example of the (scorch) mark that the Romans would leave is that of the burning of the library of Alexandria. The Library of Alexandria was one of the most important libraries in all of history ( it was constructed around 283 BCE). While it is not known how many scrolls the library had, conservative estimates are around 40,000, with more liberal numbers coming in at around 400,000. While it is believed that the entirety of the library was not destroyed, it is an example that war and the nurturing of ideas through pen and paper are often opposed to one another.

Illuminated manuscripts were popular between 1100 and 1600 CE. They were a collection of pages made from the skin of a calf or goat. Some of these manuscripts were made to hold secular content, but the majority of them were religious texts. Some of them have survived the exposure of war and famine to reveal their secrets on how the peoples of various places lived. All of these types of “paper” may have started in their respective civilization as a way to share ideas and maintain records, but to those in the present day, they have served as a window into the past.

## A room of stories

The 1400s and the invention of the printing press gave rise to the novel, a work of fiction in a single volume. These were presented in the form of hard-bound books. These texts were mobile. They could be bought, sold, taken on journeys, or sat on shelves. No longer had a single person or group of people held ownership over their own words. These words had a presence all their own. These stories were passed from person to person and debated.

A book titled *The Yong Mans Gleanings* was written by Richard Braithwaite in 1613. This was the first time the word “computer” was mentioned. However, It wouldn’t be until 1822 that Charles Babbage would build the world’s first computer. It was 50 feet wide and could only complete very simple computations such as addition and subtraction. In contrast, modern computers can send very large pieces of data across thousands of miles in a very short amount of time. But, it would open the door for modern civilization and new ways of communicating.

## The Sound of Communication

A different layer of communication was introduced in the mid-1800s by way of sound transmission. This layer came in the form of morse code and the telephone. Morse code is a way to send a transmission through standardized sequences of dashes and dots. Each letter of the alphabet is assigned a sequence of these dashes and dots. For example, the letter A is transmitted as dot-dash, B is dash-dot-dot-dot, C is dash-dot-dash-dot, etc. This method of communication is favored most by militaries. The other invention around this time was that of

the telephone. The telephone is a device that lets a person speak to another person over long distances through electrical current. These electrical currents were once controlled by people running a switchboard. In more modern times, however, they are run by an electrical grid that is controlled by a company or provider of the service.

The language of humanity has taken many forms over many thousands of years. The shifts in the forms that it has taken have driven the world from a close-knit network of people who are dependent on one another to an independent, global community. Our language shows itself in every facet of our global society. It has affected the way we think and the way we live. It will continue to affect the way we live, think, believe, and communicate with one another. Only time will tell what is next for humanity in the way of communication.