

## History

The earliest certain ancestor of "A" is aleph , the first letter of the Phoenician alphabet, which consisted entirely of consonants . In turn, the ancestor of aleph may have been a pictogram of an ox head in proto-Sinaitic script influenced by Egyptian hieroglyphs, styled as a triangular head with two horns extended.

When the ancient Greeks adopted the alphabet, they had no use for a letter to represent the glottal stop—the consonant sound that the letter denoted in Phoenician and other Semitic languages, and that was the first phoneme of the Phoenician pronunciation of the letter—so they used their version of the sign to represent the vowel , and called it by the similar name of alpha. In the earliest Greek inscriptions after the Greek Dark Ages, dating to the 8th century BC, the letter

rests upon its side, but in the Greek alphabet of later times it generally resembles the modern capital letter, although many local varieties can be distinguished by the shortening of one leg, or by the angle at which the cross line is set.

The Etruscans brought the Greek alphabet to their civilization in the Italian Peninsula and left the letter unchanged. The Romans later adopted the Etruscan alphabet to write the Latin language, and the resulting letter was preserved in the Latin alphabet that would come to be used to write many languages, including English.

## Use in writing systems

In modern English orthography, the letter represents at least seven different vowel sounds:

the near-open front unrounded vowel as in pad;

the open back unrounded vowel as in father, which is closer to its original Latin and Greek sound;

the diphthong as in ace and major – this results from Middle English lengthening followed by the Great Vowel Shift;

the modified form of the above sound that occurs before , as in square and Mary;

the rounded vowel of water;

the shorter rounded vowel in was and what;

a schwa, in many unstressed syllables, as in about, comma, solar.

The double sequence does not occur in native English words, but is found in some words derived from foreign languages such as Aaron and aardvark. However, occurs in many common digraphs, all with their own sound or sounds, particularly , , , , and .

is the third-most-commonly used letter in English , and the second most common in Spanish and French. In one study, on average, about 3.68% of letters used in

English texts tend to be , while the number is 6.22% in Spanish and 3.95% in French.

#### Other uses

In algebra, the letter *a* along with various other letters of the alphabet is often used to denote a variable, with various conventional meanings in different areas of mathematics. Moreover, in 1637, René Descartes "invented the convention of representing unknowns in equations by *x*, *y*, and *z*, and knowns by *a*, *b*, and *c*", and this convention is still often followed, especially in elementary algebra.

In geometry, capital *A*, *B*, *C* etc. are used to denote segments, lines, rays, etc. A capital *A* is also typically used as one of the letters to represent an angle

in a triangle, the lowercase *a* representing the side opposite angle *A*.

"*A*" is often used to denote something or someone of a better or more prestigious quality or status: *A*-, *A* or *A*+, the best grade that can be assigned by teachers for students' schoolwork; "*A* grade" for clean restaurants; *A*-list celebrities, etc. Such associations can have a motivating effect, as exposure to the letter *A* has been found to improve performance, when compared with other letters.[10]

"*A*" is used as a prefix on some words, such as asymmetry, to mean "not" or "without" .

In English grammar, "*a*", and its variant "*an*", is an indefinite article, used to introduce noun phrases.

Finally, the letter *A* is used to denote size, as in a narrow size shoe, or a small cup size in a brassiere.