

Language Awareness for Key Stage 3

3: Writing and Sounds

Key Terms	Optional Terms
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Character • Alphabet • Accent • International Phonetic Alphabet • Sign language 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ideogram • Syllabary • Diacritic • Acute • Grave

- Introduction: Writing systems
 - As we saw in the last lesson, the languages that we study have a history that goes back long before writing was invented
 - Since writing is a relatively recent invention, different peoples have invented a number of different writing systems
 - These writing systems focus on different aspects of language to represent speech in different ways
- Writing and pictures
 - The symbols that make up a writing system are called characters
 - These characters often derive from pictures of actual things
 - Many Chinese characters are still based on such pictures, such as the character 人 for *rén* ‘person’
 - However, pictures can only convey a certain amount of information
 - Writing systems like Chinese combine symbols that represent concepts with symbols that represent sounds
(Characters like the ones in Chinese are called ideograms)
 - For example, the character for *mā* ‘mother’ is 媽. This combines the symbol 女 for *nǚ* ‘female’, which gives you a clue to the meaning, and the symbol 馬 for a similar-sounding word *mǎ* ‘horse’, which gives you a clue to the pronunciation.
 - A writing system originally based on pictures can evolve into a true alphabet, where each symbol stands for a sound
 - For example, our letter A originally represented a picture of an ox’s head, upside-down
- Alphabets
 - Most alphabets now in use descend from an alphabet developed by the ancestors of the ancient Phoenicians, over 3000 years ago
 - The shapes of the letters have evolved in different ways

Phoenician	𐤀	𐤁	𐤂	𐤃	𐤄
Hebrew	א	ב	ג	ד	ה
Arabic	ا	ب	ج	د	ه
Greek	Α	Β	Γ	Δ	Ε
Roman	A	B	C	D	E
Cyrillic	А	В	Г	Д	Е
Runic	ᚠ	ᚢ	ᚦ	ᚨ	ᚱ

- The Hebrew, Arabic, and Greek alphabets are all derived from the Phoenician alphabet
- The Greek alphabet was borrowed and adapted by the Romans
- Other alphabets, such as Cyrillic and Runic, have been adapted in turn from these
- Syllabic writing
 - In the alphabet that we use, each letter stands for a single sound
 - There are some writing systems where each letter stands for a whole syllable (These writing systems are called syllabaries)
 - One type of syllabic writing is Japanese *hiragana* script
 - For example, there is one character き for [ki], and a completely different character く for [ku].
 - Syllabic scripts work best for languages like Japanese, where most syllables have exactly one consonant and one vowel
 - If a language has a greater number of syllable types, this would make it very complicated to have a separate character for each syllable
 - Syllabic scripts have been adapted in various ways so that they can be used for more syllable types without becoming too complex
 - The Devanagari scripts that are used for many languages of India were originally syllabic
 - However, they now have ways of representing consonants and vowels separately
 - For example, the letter क on its own means [ka]
 - To express just [k] on its own, you can add an accent to give क्
 - To change the vowel and say [ku], you can add a different accent to give कु
 - There are also separate letters for [a] and [u] on their own, अ and उ.
- Accents
 - Adding accent marks is an easy way to extend the range of sounds represented without needing a completely new alphabet (These marks are sometimes also called diacritics)
 - Accents are often added to the Roman alphabet as well
 - For example, where English has a single letter <e>, French adds accents to create three different characters <e>, <è>, and <é>
 - This means that French can distinguish more clearly between three separate sounds
- Writing and sounds
 - Even when accents are used, an alphabet is not always a perfect representation of the sounds that people speak
 - For example, letters can have different sounds in different languages
 - The sound represented by <r> in English is fairly unusual
 - In many languages, the <r> sound is more like Spanish, a flap or trill with the front of the tongue
 - There are also languages like French and German, where the <r> sound is made in the back of the throat
 - The meaning of letters can also change over time so that they come to represent different sounds
 - In the Phoenician alphabet, <א> was a consonant, [h]
 - The Greeks used the symbol <Ε> for a vowel
 - In Greek (as in Phoenician) <Γ> was pronounced [g]
 - The Roman form, <C>, had a different sound [k]
 - Linguists have developed a special alphabet, the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA)
 - In this alphabet, there is a unique symbol for every sound in all the world's languages

- This can be used to show how different sounds can correspond to the same spelling
 - For example, there are many words that are spelt the same in English and French, such as *action* and *parking*.
 - However, the pronunciations in each language are very different
 - The International Phonetic Alphabet shows those differences by representing the English words as [ˈækʃn] and [ˈpɑːkɪŋ], and the French words as [akˈsjɔ̃] and [paʁˈkiŋ].
- In these lessons, we'll be using the familiar Roman alphabet as much as possible
- If you look up words in a dictionary, though, you might see pronunciations given in the International Phonetic Alphabet
- Sign languages
 - Some languages aren't based on sound at all
 - Deaf people use sign languages to communicate without sound
 - No one knows exactly where sign language first came from (like spoken language)
 - Sign language is more than just instinctive pantomime
 - It seems to have evolved gradually over time
 - Different sign languages are spoken in different parts of the world
 - Like spoken languages, sign languages can be grouped into families
 - Sign languages combine different shapes and gestures into complex patterns, just as spoken languages do with sound
 - For example, in British Sign Language, by taking the gesture for 'number' and moving your hand in a different way, you can say 'greedy'
 - By changing the shape of your hand, you can say 'bird'
 - Sign languages have their own grammar, which puts these simple signs together to express complex abstract concepts
 - They also have an alphabet for individual letters
 - This is used for 'fingerspelling', spelling out names and places that there is no sign for
- Conclusion
 - Writing systems grow and evolve in the same way as languages, but independently of the languages that they write
 - Some writing systems use one symbol (ideogram) for a whole word
 - Other writing systems (syllabaries) use one symbol for each syllable
 - Alphabets, such as the one that we use, have one symbol for each sound
 - However, the sounds corresponding to each letter can vary between languages and over time
 - The International Phonetic Alphabet provides a uniform way of representing all sounds
 - Sign language provides a way of communicating without sound