

What's the most important communications invention in the history of the world?

- A. the telephone
- B. the computer
- C. the alphabet

Where were letters invented?

- A. Greece
- B. Egypt
- C. Phoenicia

What is the smallest particle of sound called?

- A. phonemes
- B. syllables
- C. monemes

Where is the modern Phoenicia?

- A. Turkey
- B. Israel
- C. Lebanon

How many different sounds can we make using the 26 English letters?

- A. nearly 30
- B. nearly 40
- C. nearly 50

What significant contribution did the ancient Greeks make to the alphabet? They:

- A. added vowels
- B. added consonants
- C. added punctuation

How many letters now in the English alphabet did the ancient Romans not have?

- A. 2
- B. 3
- C. 4

Which are the two most common writing systems after the Roman alphabet?

- A. Chinese & Arabic
- B. Chinese & Bengali
- C. Chinese & Japanese

TEXT

The alphabet is considered the most important invention in the history of the world. Although there are about 26 major alphabetic scripts in use, they all, except one, have a common origin.

Letters are images of language, invented around 4000 years ago in Egypt. They denote the smallest particle of sound (phonemes) and can be arranged endlessly.

The word "pencil" has two syllables and six phonemes, each represented by a separate letter. English has quite a lot of phonemes – up to 48 – one letter – o – can be pronounced different ways – go, got, ton; as can letter pairings – th as in think and this. The sound of the letter pairing sh can actually be spelt 14 different ways according to some linguists.

Where do our letters come from? The English copied the Romans, who copied the Etruscans, who copied the Greeks (which added letters for vowels), who copied the Phoenicians – a language from a place now known as Lebanon. The letters were used, even though the languages were completely different.

What we call the Roman alphabet is used by almost 2 billion people. 100 languages use it in 120 countries. The number of letters varies: English has 26, Finnish 21, Croatian 30, but the core remains the 23 of ancient Rome. They lacked j, v & w. What we write as Jupiter, the Romans would have begun with I. The V in Venus was really a u, just written as a v and pronounced as a w.

The second and third most used scripts are Chinese and Arabic. (Chinese and Japanese are non-alphabetic. Their writing symbols called logograms represent one word or concept. On an average, Chinese children need three years longer to learn to read and write than children using the Roman script.

But even before the invention of the alphabet, people have found a way to communicate: In Egypt through Hieroglyphics (pictograms) and in Mesopotamia through cuneiform (a syllabary system).

So, there we are (or from there we are).