

WHAT DID THEY WRITE ON?

Test your knowledge with these 10 questions about what people used to write on throughout history.

1. The first writing was invented millennia ago in ancient Mesopotamia, or what is now modern-day Iraq. What squishy, muddy material did these first scribes write on?

- Clay
- Stone
- Paper
- Sand

2. Papyrus is a paper-like material. It is made from the stems of the papyrus reed, which grows along the banks of the Nile River. Which ancient civilization wrote on papyrus?

- Babylon
- China
- Egypt
- India

3. The "paper" of Greek and Roman times, papyrus and parchment, was very expensive. Did they write on wax for scribbling and scratch work, since wax could be melted and reused?

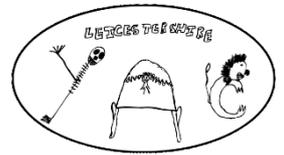
- Yes
- No

4. The Romans also wrote short inscriptions on sheets of lead, a soft metal. These were called defixiones. What mean task were defixiones used for?

- Love letters
- Shopping lists
- Cursing people
- Address books

5. Writing is a very useful invention. But, not all authors have used writing to compose their works. Which of these famous books was written by a traveling singer who could not read or write?

- Romeo and Juliet
- The Odyssey
- Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone
- The Lord of the Rings



6. In the Middle Ages, monks in monasteries produced beautifully illustrated copies of the Bible and other books, called illuminated manuscripts. The material they wrote on was called parchment. What is parchment made out of?

- Tree bark
- Animal skins
- Plastic sheets
- Animal intestines

7. You probably write on paper. Paper is actually thin sheets of shredded and compressed wood pulp. Where was paper first invented?

- Britain
- China
- America
- Russia

8. Did the native people of Central America produce their own form of paper, called amatl, from tree bark?

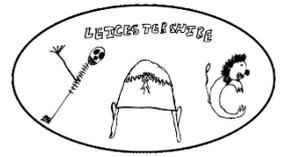
- Yes
- No

9. On which Pacific island did the inhabitants write on wooden boards? You probably know this island better for its huge stone sculptures of heads.

- Easter Island
- Long Island
- Great Britain
- Iceland

10. Rulers, countries, and individuals can commemorate themselves with public inscriptions in stone. These are called monumental inscriptions. Where could you see a monumental inscription?

- On a gravestone
- All of these
- In a church
- On a government building



ANSWERS

1. Clay

Clay was an ideal writing material. Characters could be written in it easily with a sharp stick called a stylus. When the clay dried, it became very hard and durable. Some clay tablets have survived for more than 4,500 years!

2. Egypt

Ancient Egypt was one of the first civilizations to invent writing. Their writing system is known as Egyptian Hieroglyphs. An ancient letter says that Egyptian children did not like to go to school to learn to read and write. But, their parents still made them go, because scribes would not lead a life of hard manual labour.

3. Yes

Wax tablets were the "Magic Slate" or "Etch-a-Sketch" of the Greeks and Romans. A person could write in the wax using the sharp end of a stylus. When they were done, they would smooth out or melt the wax. This would produce a fresh writing surface.

4. Cursing people

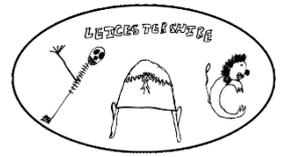
Many defixiones invoke gods and demons. Some use magic words, or were written backwards to increase their power. Most invoke terrible punishments for the evildoer, even if the crime was minor. One tablet reads, "Docimedes has lost two gloves. He asks that the person who has stolen them should lose his mind and his eyes in the temple [that Sulis] appoints."

5. The Odyssey

Writing had not yet been invented when the ancient Greek bard Homer composed the "Iliad" and "Odyssey." Generations of bards memorized his epics and taught them to their students. Later, when the Greeks developed an alphabet, they wrote down Homer's books.

6. Animal skins

Books made out of parchment were very expensive. Only the wealthiest people could own books and have libraries. One animal skin would only yield a few pages. So, one book represented the wealth needed to own the amount of land to support an entire herd of sheep, goats, or cows!



7. China

Paper is said to have been invented by Ts'ai Lun, a Chinese court official, in 105 AD. He used rags and fabric scraps. However, the process was soon adapted for wood pulp. Knowledge of paper making spread to Europe along the Silk Road.

8. Yes

Bark paper was used by the Maya, Olmec, and Aztecs for making books, many of which were beautifully illustrated. Not many of their books survive, because most were burned by Christian missionaries.

9. Easter Island

The Easter Islanders' writing is known as "rongorongo." The characters were carved into the board with a flake of obsidian or a shark's tooth.

10. All of these

Many people would think that an inscription carved in stone would be permanent. However, many old inscriptions are so eroded that they can no longer be read.