



READING CUNEIFORM



Cuneiform began about 3200 BC as small pictures drawn in clay to keep track of goods. Then scribes began pressing the marks in with a reed stylus, which makes wedges, not smooth curves. Step by step, the pictures turned into groups of wedges, and many signs were turned on their side. The chart shows how six signs changed. Then match each wedge sign to its meaning. These signs were read in Sumerian.

It meant	Early picture about 3200 BC	→	Wedge sign later	Said
star, sky, god		→		<i>an / dingir</i>
water		→		<i>a</i>
barley		→		<i>še</i>
mountain, foreign land		→		<i>kur</i>
fish		→		<i>ku6</i>
ox		→		<i>gud</i>

Why isn't there a cuneiform alphabet?

An alphabet uses a few dozen letters, each standing for one sound. Sumerian and Babylonian cuneiform had no letters. Scribes used word signs, for whole words, and syllable signs, for sounds such as ba or ku. About 600 signs were in common use, and many had several readings. Much later, about 1400 to 1200 BC, scribes in Ugarit, in Syria, made a cuneiform alphabet of 30 signs.

More word signs



sheep



donkey



king



house, temple



earth, place



clay tablet

♦ MATCH THE SIGNS ♦

Find each sign in the charts above, then write the letter of its meaning in its box.

1 Letter <input type="text"/>	2 Letter <input type="text"/>	3 Letter <input type="text"/>	4 Letter <input type="text"/>	5 Letter <input type="text"/>	6 Letter <input type="text"/>
7 Letter <input type="text"/>	8 Letter <input type="text"/>	9 Letter <input type="text"/>	10 Letter <input type="text"/>	11 Letter <input type="text"/>	12 Letter <input type="text"/>

- A. water
- B. king
- C. sheep
- D. fish

- E. ox
- F. barley
- G. house, temple
- H. donkey

- I. mountain, foreign land
- J. sky, god
- K. clay tablet
- L. earth, place

1. Early signs were pictures. Why did they turn into groups of wedges? Use the words clay and stylus in your answer.

2. Why did scribes need to study for many years at the edubba?

3. Look at the meanings in the matching list. What kind of writing were most of these signs first used for, and why?
