

WRITING SYSTEMS TERMINOLOGY

This lexicon is designed for learners exploring writing systems and for teachers who want to use precise and standardized terminology when discussing how writing works.

The definitions follow established scholarly standards from foundational works in the field of grapholinguistics. Key references include Peter T. Daniels and William Bright's *The World's Writing Systems* (1996), Dimitrios Meletis's *The Nature of Writing: A Theory of Grapholinguistics* (2020), Florian Coulmas's *The Routledge Handbook of Writing Systems* (2023).

This lexicon aims to make specialized terminology accessible without sacrificing accuracy. Clear terminology is indeed essential for understanding how different cultures have solved the challenge of representing language visually, and for appreciating both the diversity and underlying unity of the world's writing systems.

A

Abjad A writing system where symbols represent only consonants; vowels are implied or added with diacritical marks. Examples: Arabic, Hebrew.

Abugida (Alphasyllabary) A writing system where consonants have an inherent vowel that can be modified with diacritics. Examples: Devanagari (used for Hindi), Ge'ez (Ethiopian).

Allograph A variant form of a grapheme that doesn't change its identity or function. Allographs are to graphemes what allophones are to phonemes - different realizations of the same underlying unit. Examples: ⟨A⟩ and ⟨a⟩ are allographs of the same grapheme; ⟨σ⟩ and ⟨ς⟩ (Greek sigma: medial and final forms) are allographs; printed vs. handwritten forms of the same letter; different font styles: a, **a**, *a*.

Alphabet A writing system where each symbol represents a single sound (phoneme). Examples: Latin alphabet, Greek alphabet, Cyrillic.

Anatolia Ancient region corresponding to modern-day Turkey, home to several ancient civilizations and writing systems including Hittite cuneiform and Luwian hieroglyphs.

B

Bilingual A text or inscription written in two languages. Ancient bilingual texts helped scholars decipher unknown scripts.

Boustrophedon A writing direction that alternates: left-to-right on one line, then right-to-left on the next (like an ox plowing a field).

C

Character A single written symbol or sign in a writing system.

Clay Tablet A writing surface made of wet clay, used especially in Mesopotamia. The clay was inscribed while soft and then dried or baked to preserve the text.

Cuneiform One of the earliest writing systems, developed in ancient Mesopotamia around 3200 BCE. Made of wedge-shaped marks pressed into clay tablets. Used for several languages including Sumerian, Akkadian, and Hittite.

D

Decipherment The process of understanding and reading a previously unknown writing system or language.

Determinative A sign that is not pronounced but helps clarify the meaning of a word, often indicating the semantic category (person, god, place, etc.) or its pronunciation. Common in hieroglyphs and cuneiform. Also called "classifier".

Digraph Two letters that together represent a single sound. Examples: "ch" in English "chair," "gh" in Italian "spaghetti."

Directionality The direction in which a script is written: left-to-right (Latin, Greek), right-to-left (Arabic, Hebrew), top-to-bottom (traditional Chinese), or boustrophedon.

E

Epigraph An inscription on a hard surface such as stone or metal, often commemorative.

Epigraphy The study of ancient inscriptions.

G

Grapheme The minimal contrastive unit in a writing system. A grapheme is to writing what a phoneme is to speech - the smallest unit that can create a meaningful distinction. In alphabetic systems, graphemes correspond to phonemes. A grapheme can consist of: a single letter: ⟨a⟩, ⟨b⟩; multiple letters (digraph): ⟨sh⟩, ⟨ch⟩, ⟨th⟩; letters with diacritics: ⟨é⟩, ⟨ñ⟩, ⟨ü⟩. Graphemes are abstract functional units, not physical marks.

H

Hieratic A cursive form of Egyptian hieroglyphs. Simpler and faster to write than hieroglyphs.

Hieroglyphs A writing system using pictorial symbols, most famously used in ancient Egypt. Also used by the Luwians in Anatolia and by the Maya in Mesoamerica.

Hittite The most ancient Indo-European language, it was spoken in Anatolia, written primarily in cuneiform script.

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I

Ideogram A symbol that represents an idea or concept directly, rather than a sound. Example: numerals (1, 2, 3) or symbols like ♀ ♂.

Ideographic The term "ideographic" for writing systems is considered misleading or incorrect, since no writing system directly represents "ideas". Better terms: logographic, morphographic, morphosyllabic.

Inscription Text carved or written on a durable surface like stone, metal, or clay.

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L

Ligature Two or more letters combined into a single symbol. Example: "æ" in Latin, "fi" ligature in some fonts.

Linear A An undeciphered writing system used by the Minoans in ancient Crete (c. 1800-1450 BCE).

Linear B An ancient script used to write Mycenaean Greek, deciphered in 1952 by Michael Ventris. Predecessor to the Greek alphabet.

Literacy The ability to read and write. In ancient times, literacy was often limited to scribes and elite classes.

Logogram A written symbol that represents a word or morpheme. Examples: Chinese characters, Egyptian hieroglyphs.

Logographic A writing system based primarily on logograms, where symbols represent words or concepts rather than sounds.

Logography (or Morphography) Writing where graphemes represent morphemes (meaningful units) rather than sounds. Pure logographic systems don't exist. All so-called "logographic" systems (Chinese, Egyptian, Sumerian) actually contain substantial phonetic elements. Some scholars argue these should be called "morphosyllabic" systems.

Luwian An ancient Anatolian language related to Hittite, written in both cuneiform and hieroglyphic scripts.

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M

Mesopotamia Ancient region between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers (modern Iraq), where cuneiform writing was invented.

Morpheme The smallest meaningful unit in a language; can be a word or part of a word that carries meaning. Examples: "un-break-able" has 3 morphemes: un- (not), break (root), -able (can be). Morphemes carry meaning, unlike phonemes which only represent sound.

Morphogram A written symbol that represents a morpheme (meaningful unit) rather than just a sound. Essentially synonymous with logogram, but emphasizes that the symbol represents a unit of meaning/grammar. The distinction between morphogram and logogram is subtle. Some scholars use them interchangeably, while others reserve "morphogram" for grammatical morphemes (prefixes, suffixes, particles) and "logogram" for content words (nouns, verbs). In practice, both represent meaningful units rather than sounds.

Morphography see **Logography**

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O

Orthography The conventional spelling system of a language; the rules for how to write correctly.

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P

Palaeography The study of ancient and historical handwriting and writing systems.

Papyrus A writing material made from the papyrus plant, used extensively in ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome. Sheets were made by pressing together strips of the plant stem.

Parchment Writing material made from treated animal skins (sheep, goat, calf). More durable than papyrus and could be reused (palimpsest).

Phoneme The smallest unit of sound in a language that can distinguish meaning. Example: /p/ and /b/ are different phonemes in English (pit vs. bit).

Phonetic Representing sounds of speech. Phonetic writing systems represent how words sound.

Phonogram A symbol that represents a sound rather than a meaning. Alphabetic letters are phonograms.

Phonography Writing that represents the sounds of language. The symbols (graphemes) correspond to phonological units. Types of phonography: alphabetic (segmental), graphemes represent individual phonemes; syllabic: graphemes represent syllables; abjad: graphemes represent consonants only; abugida/alphasyllabary: consonant graphemes with inherent vowels modified by diacritics.

Pictogram A symbol that represents an object or concept through a recognizable picture. Example: a drawing of a sun to mean "sun" or "day."

Pictographic A writing system based on pictorial representations of objects and ideas.

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R

Rebus Using pictures or symbols to represent sounds rather than meanings. Example: to[a bee] for "to be" Important in the development of phonetic writing.

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S

Scribe A professional writer in ancient societies. Scribes were highly trained and held important positions since literacy was rare.

Script A writing system or the style of writing. Can refer to the visual form (Latin script, Arabic script) or the complete system.

Seal A carved object (often cylindrical or stamp-shaped) used to make impressions in clay or wax, serving as a signature or mark of authenticity. Often contained the owner's name in cuneiform or hieroglyphs.

Semitic A language family including Akkadian, Hebrew, Arabic, and Aramaic.

Sign A basic unit in a writing system; can be a letter, symbol, character, or glyph.

Stele An upright stone slab or pillar with inscriptions, often commemorative or marking a boundary.

Stylus A pointed tool used for writing, especially on clay tablets (for cuneiform).

Syllabary A writing system where each symbol represents a syllable (combination of consonant + vowel). Example: Linear B.

Syllabogram A symbol that represents a syllable rather than a single sound or word.

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T

Transliteration Converting text from one writing system to another, representing the same sounds. Example: writing Greek words using Latin letters.

Translation Converting text from one language to another, preserving the meaning.

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W

Writing System A communication's modality, it visually encodes language through symbols and signs. Can be alphabetic, syllabic, logographic, or mixed.