



# Understanding Hieroglyphs: Be the Scribe

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**Historical Context:** Hieroglyphic writing is one of the earliest forms of written language found. Many different versions exist throughout the world, but the common theme is that a picture or image is used to represent either a sound or a word. The ancient Aztecs and Mayan of Mesoamerica, and the Inca of South America, all developed their own style of glyphic (picture) writing. This contrasts to the alphabet which we use, which has a letter to represent the sound, building words from combinations of letters. The ancient Egyptians, beginning about 5,000 years ago, used both picture words and picture sounds in their writings. As the language evolved, the symbolic sounds were used more than the picture of the word. Elaborate pictures representing words were not an efficient way to record documents, or for daily usage, so an alphabet of 24 sounds was developed. It could be written either right to left, left to right, or top to bottom, depending on the location and usage of the text. The symbols would be orientated to indicate which way to read them, based on which way they, or the figures around them, were facing.

The hieroglyphs were generally used either in carving stone, painting on walls, or written on paper made of papyrus. Papyrus was a plant that grew readily in the river valley and was woven into paper. Few people were trained to properly create the hieroglyphs, and those who could had to reproduce them in identical fashion each time. This job of writing and recording became a specialized job, and the scribes were of great importance to the priests and government officials they served. Hieratic was a script form of hieroglyphic writing used for letters and accounts.

**Time:** One class period (40 minutes)

**Correlation to Standards:** World History, Language, Art

**Materials Needed:** Copies of hieroglyphic alphabet for each group of students, one “Say What” sheet for each pair of students, one “Now Write it” sheet for each student.



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**Objectives:** Students will be able to:

Identify the difference between the hieroglyphic and the Latin-based alphabet we use.

Identify and decode hieroglyphic letters and words.

Write using hieroglyphs.

Understand some of the difficulties of using hieroglyphics and the need for specialized scribes.

**Task:** Teacher will divide class into partners.

The class should begin by reciting out loud the alphabet, "A,B,C...".

When done, teacher will ask: What does the alphabet actually represent?

Look for an answer of represent sounds for building words.

Then ask: How else can we write words, without using letters?

Look for answer of draw pictures of the word.

Teacher now explains to students that earliest forms of writing did just that, represented words using pictures; these are known as hieroglyphs, literally "holy writing". In Ancient Egypt there were specialized jobs of people who wrote and recorded information for the government and priests, the people who had these jobs were known as scribes. It took years of formal training to become a scribe, as you had to learn to write they symbols, the rules of how to write them, and be able reproduce your hieroglyphs the same way all the time.

Teacher will hand out the hieroglyphic alphabet to students, have them look it over for a minute and ask what observations they can make.

The same symbol represents different letters.

Teacher will explain (write examples on the board) that often vowels were not written, so the word SUN would be SN, have them sound out SN (sss-nnn). GIRL would be GRL (grr-L). PHONE would be (F-OOO-NN) and would be spelled FON, and so on. Remember: Words are written the way they sound, not how we spell them.



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Teacher will hand out the hieroglyph words sheet, and have students work together in pairs to decipher the words. Go over answers together; ask what problems they ran into?

Next, on the reverse side of the sheet, explain that they are going to write the word you give them, and then place it on the board. Teacher will distribute words to students, taking care to give each partner a different word, and making sure each word is being written by at least two students (for later comparison). Give five minutes or so to write the word. Then have students place their word on the board, matching same words together.

Ask students “ What do they notice?”

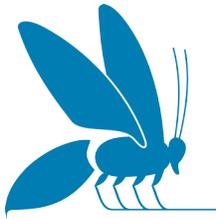
Some should be much neater and easier to decipher than others, the different students draw the same hieroglyph differently, etc...

Explain that this is a reason why there were special people known as scribes whose job it was to write everything. Most “common people” could not and did not write anything.

Students return to their seats and are given a piece of card stock to write their own name on to create a cartouche or name plate. These can then be displayed in room/ hall as part of unit.

**Assessment:** Student’s ability to decode words and produce nameplate.

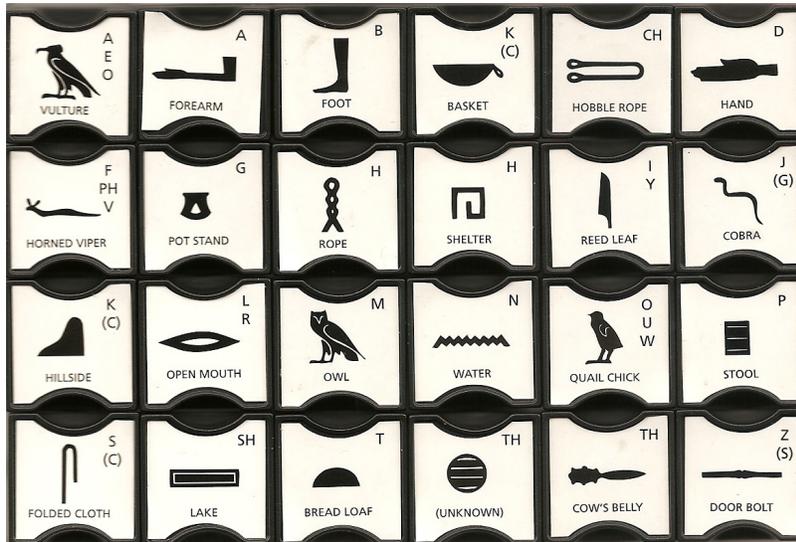
**Extension:** Have students try to develop new letters for some of the sounds used in the English language (consonant blends) based on phonetics (how words sound).



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## Basic Hieroglyphic Alphabet



Catharine  
Roehrig:  
Fun with  
Hieroglyphs

## Say What?!?

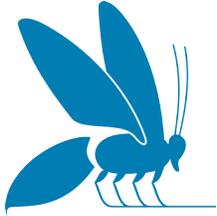
**Directions:** With your partner, work to decode the hieroglyphic words using your copy of the alphabet. Remember to sound out the letter sounds. These words are all written left to right.

Now Write it!

**Directions:** Use this space to write the word your teacher gives you, use the whole space, draw neatly, and remember to sound out the word...don't spell it out.

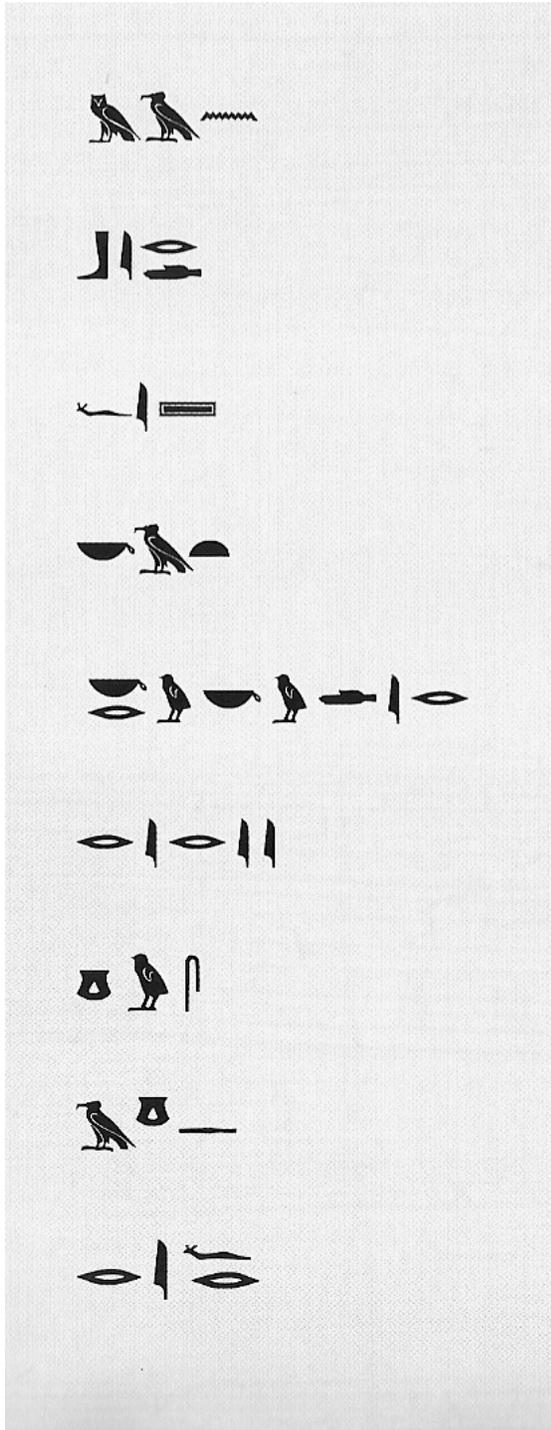
**Words to write out.** Give one word to each student or pair:

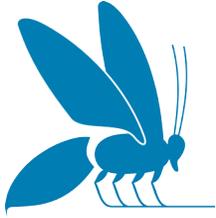
- Teacher
- School
- Boot
- Twin
- Tree
- Sugar
- Cat
- Food
- Map
- Think



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**Say What?!?**

**Answers:**

1. MAN
2. BIRD
3. FISH
4. CAT
5. CROCODILE
6. LILY
7. GOOSE
8. EGGS
9. RIVER