

# RAFT IDEAS

**Topics:** Communication  
Writing, Languages

## Materials List

- ✓ Polymer clay
- ✓ Roller (to flatten clay) (optional)
- ✓ Triangular game piece or other similar object to use as a stylus

This activity can be used to teach:

- Knowledge and understanding of the past (National Curriculum for Social Studies: Theme 2, Time, Continuity, & Change)
- Writing research project (Common Core English Language Arts Standards: Grades 4-8, Writing, 7)

# Writing Like an Ancient Scribe

## The Earliest Alphabet



Image credit: Coron's Sources of Fonts (Geocities)

Students play the role of Ugaritic scribes in this activity when they use a stylus to stamp cone-shaped marks into clay.

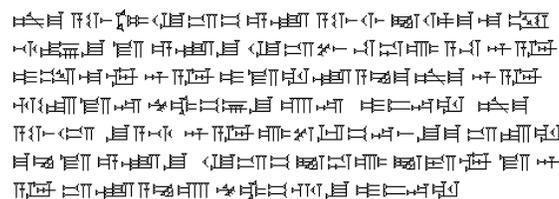
## To Do and Notice

1. Roll out polymer clay into 5 mm (~1/4") slabs.
2. Use the game piece or other triangular stylus to imprint letters into the clay using the Ugaritic alphabet table on page 2.

## The Content Behind the Activity

Learning an alphabet means recognizing a squiggle, line or other form as a sound. This process is decoding, whether it involves reading English written in the Roman alphabet or the oldest known alphabet: Ugaritic, a cuneiform alphabet written into clay tablets.

The development of written language ranks high among important events in the history of human technology. Cuneiform writing dates back 5500 years, to the "cradle of civilization", the Middle East. Several written forms used these cone-shaped marks, including the Sumerians in Mesopotamia (current-day Iraq). However, the Ugaritic alphabet is considered the first true alphabet (as opposed to writing based on syllables or words), and the letter order eventually influenced the Greek and Roman alphabets. This writing system was employed in the city of Ugarit, located in western Syria from around 1300 BCE.



## Sample cuneiform writing

Image credit: Omniglot.com



Cuneiform Stylus



Image credit: USC  
West Semitic Research Project

There are between 4,000 – 6,000 languages currently used for communication by humans on Earth, but linguists predict that at least half of these languages will no longer be used in 50 years. The top five languages by number of speakers are: Mandarin Chinese, Hindi/Urdu, English, Spanish, and Russian.

**Web Resources** (Visit [www.raft.net/raft-idea?isid=469](http://www.raft.net/raft-idea?isid=469) for more resources!)

- For information on several early languages and alphabets, visit: [http://www.ancientscripts.com/ws\\_atoz.html](http://www.ancientscripts.com/ws_atoz.html)
- The following site translates names (initials) using an ancient Mesopotamian writing form. <http://www.penn.museum/cgi/cuneiform.cgi>
- For information on the evolution of several types of alphabets, visit: <http://www.wam.umd.edu/~rfradkin/alphapage.html>
- For many alphabets and scripts used in the world today, go to: <http://www.omniglot.com/writing/alphabetic.htm>

**Ugaritic alphabet (The first true alphabet, dating from 1,300 BCE)**

Table from: AncientScripts.com

 'a	 b	 g	 h	 d	 h
 w	 z	 h	 t	 y	 k
 s	 l	 m	 d	 n	 z
 s	 '	 p	 s	 q	 r
 t	 g	 t	 i	 u	 s <sub>2</sub>