PART II. AN INTRODUCTION TO THE HISTORY OF LINGUISTICS

KEY TOPIC(S):
- A brief introduction to the history of writing.

PASSAGES FOR DISCUSSION

Passage 1

The history of writing
An account of the early history of writing has gradually emerged, but it contains many gaps and ambiguities.

The matter is complicated by the fact that, in this early period, it is by no means easy to decide whether a piece of graphic expression should be counted as an artistic image or as a symbol of primitive writing. In principle, the difference is clear: the former convey personal and subjective meanings, and do not combine into a system of recurring symbols with accepted values; by contrast, the latter is conventional and institutionalized, capable of being understood in the same way by all who are using the system. When the product is a rock carving or painting of an animal, there is little doubt that its purpose is non-linguistic (though whether it has an aesthetic, religious, or other function is debatable). However, when the product is a series of apparent geometrical shapes or tiny characters, the distinction between art and writing becomes less obvious. The languages may even reflect the problem: in early Greek, and in Egyptian, the same word was used for both ‘write’ and ‘draw’.

One point, at least, is fairly clear. It now seems most likely that writing systems evolved independently of each other at different times in several parts of the world – in Mesopotamia, China, Meso-America, and elsewhere. [...] There are of course similarities between these systems, but these are not altogether surprising, given the limited ways of devising a system of written communication.

Precursors
The earliest examples of a conventional use of written symbols are on clay tablets discovered in various parts of the Middle East and south-east Europe from around 3500BC. Large numbers of tablets made by the Sumerians have been found in sites around the Rivers Tigris and Euphrates in present-day Iraq and Iran. [...] They seem to have recorded such matters as land sales, business transactions, and tax accounts.
**Topics for discussion**
Quickly write down as many ideas as you can think of. Write in short note form and do not worry about the order you write them in.

- Writing or drawing?
- Need of a writing system. Purpose of writing.

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**Passage 2**

**Types of writing system**

The vast majority of present-day systems are phonological; the non-phonological systems are mainly found in the early history of writing, which is where we begin.

**NON-PHONOLOGICAL SYSTEMS**

**PICTOGRAPHIC**

In this system, the graphemes (often referred to as *pictographs* or *pictograms*) provide a recognizable picture of the entities as they exist in the world. For example, a set of wavy lines might represent the sea or a river, and outlines of people and animals represent their living counterparts.

There is [...] a great deal of possible ambiguity when it comes to reading sequences of pictograms, and many of these scripts have proved difficult or impossible to decipher. The problem can be illustrated with a modern pictogram, such as [the common] road sign. Without knowing the context, the sign could be ‘read’ in all kinds of ways – someone has been/will be/is digging/clearing/stopping a landside [...] Modern drivers know the likely context, so ambiguity is uncommon. When we are studying 5,000-year-old pictograms, the likely context may not be known.

 [...] Pictograms constitute the earliest system of writing and are found in many parts of the world where the remains of early people have been discovered. They have been discovered in Egypt and Mesopotamia from around 3000 BC, and in China from around 1500 BC.

**IDEOGRAPHIC**

Ideographic writing is usually distinguished as a later development of pictographic. *Ideograms*, or *ideographs*, have an abstract or conventional meaning, no longer displaying a clear pictorial link with external reality. Two factors account for this. The shape of an ideogram may so alter that it is no longer recognizable as a pictorial representation of an object; and its original meaning may extend to include notions that lack any clear pictorial form. In early Sumerian writing, for example, the picture of a starry sky came to mean ‘night’, ‘dark’, or ‘black’; a foot came to represent ‘go’, ‘stand’, and other such notions.
CUNEIFORM
The cuneiform method of writing dates from the 4th millennium BC, and was used to express both non-phonological and phonological writing systems in several languages. The name derives from the Latin, meaning ‘wedge-shaped’, and refers to the technique used to make the symbols. A stylus was pressed into a tablet of soft clay to make a sequence of short straight strokes. In later periods, harder materials were used. The strokes are thickest at the top and to the left, reflecting the direction of writing: at first, symbols were written from top to bottom; later, they were turned onto their sides, and written from left to right.

The earliest cuneiform was a development of pictographic symbols. Subsequently, the script was used to write words and syllables, and to mark phonetic elements. It was used for over 3,000 years throughout the Near East by such cultures as the Sumerians, Babylonians, Assyrians, and Hittites.

EGYPTIAN HIEROGLYPHIC
In Egypt, a form of pictography developed around 3000 BC, which came to be called hieroglyphic (from the Greek ‘sacred carving’), because of its prominent use in temples, tombs, and other special places.

[...] The units of the writing system are known as hieroglyphs. They tend to be written from right to left, with the symbols generally facing the beginning of a row; but vertical rows are also found, following the line of a building. The script gives the general impression of being pictorial, but in fact it contains three types of symbol that together represent words.

LOGOGRAPHIC
Logographic writing systems are those where the graphemes represent words. The best-known cases are Chinese, and its derivative script, Japanese kanji. The symbols are variously referred to as logographs, logograms, or – in the case of oriental languages – characters.

[...] Several thousand graphemes are involved in a logographic system. The great Chinese dictionary of K’ang Hsi (1662-1722) contains nearly 50,000 characters, but most of these are archaic or highly specialized. In the modern language, basic literacy requires knowledge of some 2,000 characters. Similarly, in Japanese, 1,850 characters are prescribed by the Japanese Ministry of Education and adopted by law as those most essential for everyday use. Of these, 881 are taught during the six years of elementary school.

Topics for discussion
- Direction of writing.
- Advantages and disadvantages of non-phonological writing systems.
- Today’s pictograms, ideograms and logograms.
Passage 3

Types of writing system (cont.)

PHONOLOGICAL SYSTEMS (see Reading assignment 7)