Name: _____ Date: _____

From Twenty-Two Signs to the Alphabet: Phoenicians

Circle group

Many early writing systems were hard to learn. Egyptian hieroglyphs and the wedge writing of Mesopotamia had hundreds of signs. Only trained scribes could master them. Reading and writing stayed with a small group.

The Phoenicians did it differently. They lived in port cities on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea. That is part of modern Lebanon today. They were busy sailors and traders. Merchants had to keep records of cargo. They also had to send messages to partners in far harbors. By about 1000 BCE, the Phoenicians used an alphabet of around twenty-two letters. Each letter stood for a consonant sound. A word was written by putting the sounds in order.

The big gain was how simple it was. A learner could memorize twenty-two letters fast. That is easier than hundreds of signs. Writing could spread beyond palaces and temples. More people could join in trade and keep records.

The alphabet traveled on Phoenician ships. The Greeks borrowed it and made one big change. Their language had vowel sounds that mattered. So they used some extra letters for vowels. Later it passed to the Romans. Our own alphabet comes from it.

The word alphabet holds a clue. It comes from alpha and beta. These are the first two Greek letters. They grew from the names of the first two Phoenician ones.

Questions

1. Why was it hard to learn hieroglyphs?

_____

_____

2. Where did the Phoenicians live?

_____

_____

3. What did each Phoenician letter stand for?

_____

_____

4. What big change did the Greeks make?

_____

_____

5. Why did a simple alphabet help writing spread?

_____

_____

6. How did the alphabet reach so many places?

_____

_____

Words to know

scribes: people whose job was to write and copy documents
consonant: a speech sound like b, t, or m made by closing the mouth or throat
cargo: goods carried on a ship
vowel: a speech sound like a, e, or o made with an open mouth

Talk together (every group has these)

1. Find one fact that every group read. How did your sheet say it?
2. What did your sheet tell you that you think another group's did not? Ask them.
3. What is one question about this topic that none of the sheets answered?

Name: _____ Date: _____

From Twenty-Two Signs to the Alphabet: Phoenicians

Triangle group

Many early writing systems were difficult to learn. Egyptian hieroglyphs and the wedge-shaped writing of Mesopotamia used hundreds of signs, so only trained scribes could master them. Reading and writing stayed in the hands of a small group.

The Phoenicians took a different path. They lived in port cities along the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea, in a region that is part of modern Lebanon, and they were energetic sailors and traders. Merchants needed to keep records of cargo and send messages to partners in distant harbors. By about 1000 BCE, they were using an alphabet of around twenty-two letters. Each letter stood for a consonant sound, and words were written by putting the sounds in order.

The great advantage was simplicity. A learner could memorize twenty-two letters in a short time, much faster than hundreds of signs. Writing could then spread beyond palaces and temples, and more people could take part in trade and record keeping.

As Phoenician ships traveled, the alphabet traveled with them. The Greeks borrowed it and made an important change. Because their language had vowel sounds that mattered, they used some unneeded letters to stand for vowels. Over time, this system passed to the Romans, and our own alphabet descends from it.

Even the word alphabet carries a hint of its history. It comes from alpha and beta, the first two Greek letters, which grew from the names of the first two Phoenician ones.

Questions

1. Why was it hard to learn early writing systems like hieroglyphs?

_____

_____

2. Where did the Phoenicians live?

_____

_____

3. What did each Phoenician letter stand for?

_____

_____

4. What important change did the Greeks make?

_____

_____

5. Why did a simple alphabet help writing spread to more people?

_____

_____

6. How did the Phoenician alphabet reach so many places?

_____

_____

Words to know

scribes: people whose job was to write and copy documents
consonant: a speech sound like b, t, or m made by closing the mouth or throat
cargo: goods carried on a ship
vowel: a speech sound like a, e, or o made with an open mouth
descends: comes down from an earlier source

Talk together (every group has these)

1. Find one fact that every group read. How did your sheet say it?
2. What did your sheet tell you that you think another group's did not? Ask them.
3. What is one question about this topic that none of the sheets answered?

Name: _____ Date: _____

From Twenty-Two Signs to the Alphabet: Phoenicians

Square group

Many of the earliest writing systems were exceedingly difficult to learn. Egyptian hieroglyphs and the wedge-shaped script of Mesopotamia employed hundreds of separate signs, so that only professionally trained scribes could master them. As a result, literacy remained concentrated in the hands of a small and privileged group.

The Phoenicians pursued a very different path. They inhabited port cities along the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea, in a region that forms part of modern Lebanon, and they were energetic sailors and traders. Their merchants needed to keep accurate records of cargo and to send messages to partners in distant harbors. By about 1000 BCE, they were using an alphabet of approximately twenty-two letters. Each letter represented a consonant sound, and words were written by arranging those sounds in sequence.

The great advantage of this approach was its simplicity. A learner could memorize twenty-two letters in a remarkably short time, far more quickly than hundreds of individual signs. Writing could therefore extend beyond palaces and temples, and a much wider range of people could take part in commerce and record keeping.

As Phoenician ships voyaged from harbor to harbor, the alphabet journeyed along with them. The Greeks borrowed it and introduced a crucial modification. Because vowel sounds were essential in their language, they converted several unneeded letters into vowels. In time, this system was handed on to the Romans, and our own alphabet descends from it.

Even the word alphabet preserves a trace of this history. It derives from alpha and beta, the first two Greek letters, which grew out of the names of the first two Phoenician ones.

Questions

1. Why were early writing systems like hieroglyphs so difficult to learn?

_____

_____

2. Where did the Phoenicians live?

_____

_____

3. What did each Phoenician letter represent?

_____

_____

4. What crucial modification did the Greeks introduce?

_____

_____

5. Why did a simple alphabet allow writing to reach a wider range of people?

_____

_____

6. How did the Phoenician alphabet come to be known in so many places?

_____

_____

Words to know

scribes: people whose job was to write and copy documents
consonant: a speech sound like b, t, or m made by closing the mouth or throat
cargo: goods carried on a ship
vowel: a speech sound like a, e, or o made with an open mouth
descends: comes down from an earlier source

Talk together (every group has these)

1. Find one fact that every group read. How did your sheet say it?
2. What did your sheet tell you that you think another group's did not? Ask them.
3. What is one question about this topic that none of the sheets answered?

For the teacher: From Twenty-Two Signs to the Alphabet: Phoenicians

Each student sheet carries a shape, not a level. The same topic and facts, written three ways.

Circle: From Twenty-Two Signs to the Alphabet: Phoenicians

Easier · 224 words · Flesch-Kincaid grade 4.8

1. They had hundreds of signs, so only trained scribes could master them.
2. In port cities on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea.
3. A consonant sound.
4. They used some letters for vowel sounds.
5. It was fast to learn, so writing was not just for a small group of scribes.
6. Phoenician ships and traders carried it.

Triangle: From Twenty-Two Signs to the Alphabet: Phoenicians

This passage · 242 words · Flesch-Kincaid grade 7.7

1. They used hundreds of signs, so only trained scribes could master them.
2. In port cities on the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea.
3. A consonant sound.
4. They used some letters to stand for vowel sounds.
5. It could be learned quickly, so writing was no longer limited to a small group of scribes.
6. Phoenician ships and traders carried it as they traveled.

Square: From Twenty-Two Signs to the Alphabet: Phoenicians

Harder · 271 words · Flesch-Kincaid grade 10.4

1. They used hundreds of separate signs, so only trained scribes could master them.
2. In port cities along the eastern shore of the Mediterranean Sea.
3. A consonant sound.
4. They turned several unneeded letters into vowels.
5. It could be memorized quickly, so writing was no longer limited to a small group of scribes.
6. Phoenician ships and traders carried it from harbor to harbor.