

Rosetta Stone Project: Everything You Need to Know

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OVERVIEW

The Rosetta Stone Project is a fun, hands-on activity in which students create their own modified “Rosetta Stone” clay tablets. Students first learn how available materials influenced the development of scripts in Mesopotamia and Egypt, how the knowledge of cuneiform and hieroglyphs was lost for more than 1,000 years, and how these scripts were finally deciphered in the 19th century. Then they create a message that reflects a Mesopotamian or an Egyptian cultural perspective, transliterate their message into cuneiform and hieroglyphs, and inscribe individual tablets with their message. Finally, they reflect on their learning process.

This project involves some conscious poetic license. Having researched the original Rosetta Stone, students understand the significance of the three original scripts (hieroglyphs, demotic, Greek). As it is impractical for students to incise into hard stone, instead they press a wedge-shaped tool into soft clay to create cuneiform, paint hieroglyphs onto the clay surface to imitate writing on stone or papyrus, and lastly press block English letters into the clay. As in ancient times, the requirements and limitations of available materials influence the technique and final product.

GRADE LEVELS

This project was designed for ninth grade but can be adapted for other grade levels. Younger students might simply make a smaller tablet and write their name in hieroglyphs and/or cuneiform. Older students might research other scripts and/or write a research paper on the Rosetta Stone, the decipherment of cuneiform, or famous archaeologists or epigraphers. For all levels, the purpose of the project is to understand and experience first-hand the nature of written expression as informed by material and cultural factors.

GOALS

The primary goals for this project are for students to:

- learn how writing evolved and how ideas and sounds can be represented visually in pictograms, ideograms, phonograms, and alphabets
- understand the history and significance of the Rosetta Stone and the Behistun Inscription
- explore how the stories and aphorisms of Mesopotamia and Egypt reflect cultural values
- examine how available materials influenced the de-

velopment of writing

- experience writing as a kinesthetic, aesthetic, and intellectual endeavor
- reflect meaningfully on their learning experience

MATERIALS

- white earthenware clay, available at ceramic or art supply stores (if a kiln is not available, oven-baked clay such as Fimo or Sculpey or self-hardening clay will achieve close to the same results)
- wood modeling tools to impress wedge shapes, straight lines, or small triangles; alternatively, sticks, lengths of dowel, chopsticks, twigs, bamboo, or reeds with the ends filed or whittled to produce small straight lines, small triangles, or wedges when pressed into the clay
- paintbrushes with very fine tips, in sizes 000 to 2
- heavy card stock for making two-dimensional tablets (gray or buff colored, 8½ x 11 inches)
- pencils, art gum erasers, rulers, ultra-fine permanent writers (black)
- two-gallon plastic baggies or trash-can liners
- small plastic containers (approximately two ounces)
- newspaper and plastic dining trays
- cutting wire (to slice individual clay slabs from the larger block)
- rolling pins (heavy, for rolling out clay and smoothing surfaces)
- knives for trimming the edges of clay slabs
- underglaze for painting hieroglyphs (if using oven-baked or self-hardening clay, use black acrylic paint instead)
- buckets for water, sponges, wet wipes, and/or paper towels for cleaning work surfaces

CLASS TIME

The entire project takes five class periods of about 45 minutes, as follows:

- Day 1: Introduce project; lesson on hieroglyphs
- Day 2: Lecture on cuneiform; read samples of Egyptian and Mesopotamian proverbs; discuss guidelines for student messages; students choose their messages for homework
- Day 3: Students practice transliterating their messages and make two-dimensional tablets
- Day 4: Students roll out their tablets and inscribe their messages in cuneiform
- Day 5: Students complete hieroglyphs and English

scripts; for homework they write their reflection essays

PROCEDURES

Note: For complete procedures, refer to the full explanations in the *Teachers* document.

Teaching the Development and Decipherment of Ancient Scripts

Before embarking on the hands-on elements of this project, students should be introduced to writing in ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt. The teacher will present this information in fairly brief presentations accompanied by visual images and handouts. Ideally, s/he can focus on the influence of raw materials on the development of each script, the uses of writing and how they expanded over time, the role of the scribe in ancient society, and the remarkable scholars whose success in deciphering ancient scripts effectively created the disciplines of Near Eastern studies and Egyptology. Students receive a handout on “Key Terms and People” and write definitions either in class or as homework. To prepare for this project, teachers may consult books and online sources listed in *Resources*, such as *The Story of Writing* (Andrew Robinson), *The Story of Decipherment* (Maurice Pope), “About Cuneiform” (University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, online source), and “Historic Writing” (British Museum, online source).

Choosing a Message

Instruct students to imagine they are scribes living in ancient Mesopotamia or Egypt. They have been commissioned by the royal family to inscribe a special message commemorating the birth of a royal heir. The message should contain words of wisdom for this child to live by as he or she grows up. Books should be available in the classroom for inspiration, and the teacher should guide students to primary source material such as the Instructions of Ptah-Hotep, Babylonian proverbs from the library of the Assyrian king Assurbanipal, or the *Epic of Gilgamesh* for ideas (see *Resources*). The Internet Ancient History Sourcebook contains many full-text primary source documents. Students may use an expression from

an ancient text, or they may come up with their own message that reflects the values and perspective of their ancient time and culture.

Transliterating

For this project, students will be transliterating the sounds of the English language into two scripts: cuneiform and hieroglyphs. Teachers should provide handouts for cuneiform and hieroglyph symbols and their corresponding English sounds and meanings (see *Resources*). Students write their English message underneath the cuneiform and hieroglyphic versions.

Making a Two-dimensional Tablet

Once students have transliterated their messages, they make two-dimensional versions of their tablets and practice the size and spacing of symbols.

Making the Clay Tablet

Beginning with cuneiform, students practice writing each script on pieces of scrap clay before proceeding to their actual tablets. When they are competent making cuneiform, they roll out 6 x 8 inch clay slabs for their tablets and inscribe their cuneiform message, copying the layout and symbols from their two-dimensional tablets. Then, using a fine-tipped paintbrush, they paint their hieroglyphs onto the clay. Finally, they press the English letters into the clay. The tablets need to dry out completely before firing (up to two weeks).

SUMMING UP

The *Reflection Assignment* is designed to reinforce students' theoretical understanding of early writing systems and their decipherment as well as allowing them to reflect on their own process.

ASSESSMENT

Each component of the project is assessed individually and the points added to produce an overall grade for the project. See *Grading Rubric*.