



Activity title

Sumerian clay tokens and tablets - a permanent record of what was being bought?

Time required

1 hour plus time for clay to dry

Activity summary

Producing cuneiform messages and a tablet with cuneiform writing.

By the end of this activity, you will be able to:

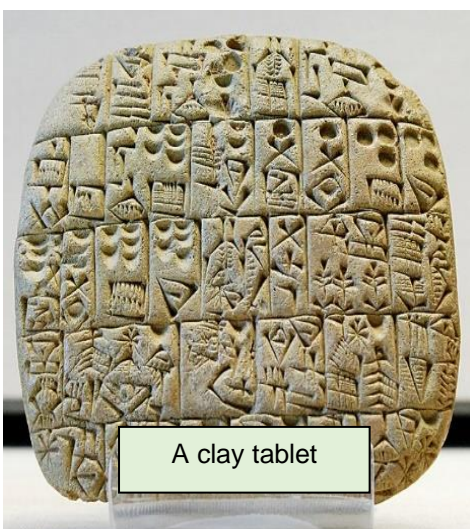
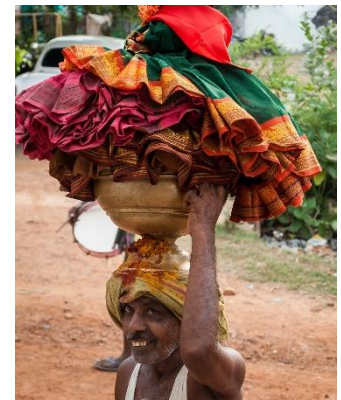
Communicate a message on a homemade tablet using drawn symbols.

What's this all about?

Before money was invented, people swapped things with each other to get what they needed. Sometimes this wasn't easy.

Imagine you need to get food for the week. You might have to visit several people, carrying all the things you have to swap. Even when you find what you need, the person who has it might not want what you have. You might have to swap different items with several people to get the one thing you needed. This could take a long time and was very tiring.

About 5000 years ago, there was a brilliant idea. People could use tokens to represent goods, rather than having to carry everything around!



A clay tablet

The first tokens used pictures to show what they represented. The tokens were made from clay, which was baked hard so the picture could not be changed.

Drawing the pictures on the tokens took a long time. It was also difficult to do. Then there was another brilliant idea – they could use symbols rather than pictures. Each symbol would have a meaning that everyone understood.

This was one of the first forms of writing. It was known as Cuneiform.

As more people started using the same symbols, they started to use cuneiform for other things – such as sending messages and writing down stories and poems. There was no paper, so these were written on slabs of clay, called tablets.

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Cuneiform symbols

Here are some examples of cuneiform symbols. These were found on actual clay tablets that were made around 5000 years ago. Each symbol has a meaning.

	to grow		water		mountains		star
	to plant		corn		forest		constellation
	to give or onions		pine		orchard		earth
	to see		reed		wood		universe
	to hear		ox		fields		day or light or sun
	to stand		fish		temple		night
	nourish or feed		bird		village		month
	to divide		duck		house		foundation
	to throw		milk		door		oath
	to bend		wine		enclosure		destiny
	to split		head		sheepfold		throne
	to kill		mouth		pot		combat
	child		hand		vase		balance
	man		arm or authority		shovel		wedge
	prince		heart		bow		new
	king		hip		arrow		image
	guard		back		dagger		harp
	his		tongue		wicker-work		canal

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Using Cuneiform

Here is an example of a message using these symbols:



= child



= grow



= corn

'Cuneiform' means 'wedge shaped'. This comes from the typical shape of the marks pushed into the clay.

The message reads: The child grows corn.

What equipment will you need?

- **Something to make your tablet from.** This could be a modelling material, such as plasticine or play dough. You could use clay if it is available.
- **A rolling pin.**
- **A 'stylus' to write on your tablet.** This could be a fork or spoon handle.

Now try this

1. Cuneiform Message

Use the chart of cuneiform words to work out this message:

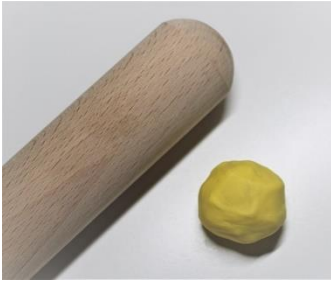


Now write your own message using the cuneiform symbols:

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2. Make a tablet

Take a lump of modelling material about the size of your fist.



Using a rolling pin, roll this out until it is about the thickness of your finger, when you put it by the side of it. The surface of your tablet should be flat.



3. Writing a Cuneiform message on the tablet

Using your stylus, write your own message using cuneiform symbols onto your tablet.



You could also

Design cuneiform symbols to represent the important things in your life.

Use your cuneiform symbols to describe what you will doing tonight or at the weekend.

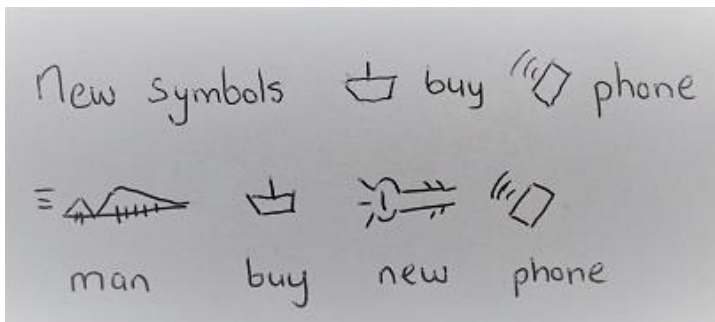
The following websites can be used for additional background information:

YouTube - What is Cuneiform: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wWfW8rHCyic>

YouTube - Ancient writing: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wWfW8rHCyic>

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What results are expected?



Child give ox water



Ox milk pot

With thanks to Hawthorns Primary School, Worthing, for sharing these resources which were created as a series of activities to celebrate 150 years of the IET.

