Grades: 6  
Subjects: Social Studies, Mathematics  
Time Required: 1 30 to 45 minute class period  
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Overview
In this activity, students discuss the concept of symbolic writing and analyze several examples of cuneiform, the writing system of ancient Sumeria. Students will also use a worksheet to create their own writing systems based on cuneiform and then use this writing to record a transaction.

Investigative Question
How were the earliest forms of writing developed?

Materials
- Cuneiform Activity Worksheet
- Primary Source Analysis Tool with Teacher’s Guide
- http://www.ancientscripts.com/sumerian.html
- “Write Like A Babylonian” web tool at http://www.penn.museum/cgi/cuneiform.cgi

Curriculum Standards
World History and Geography: Early Civilizations through the Decline of the Roman Empire (5th century C.E.)
6.11 Identify important achievements of the Mesopotamian civilization, including cuneiform, clay tablets, and ziggurats, and identify the Epic of Gilgamesh as the oldest written epic.

Mathematics
Standard 6.EE.C.9
Use variables to represent two quantities in a real-world problem that change in relationship to one another.
6.EE.C.9a
Write an equation to express one quantity, thought of as the dependent variable, in terms of the other quantity, thought of as the independent variable.
6.EE.B.9b
Analyze the relationship between the dependent and independent variables using graphs and tables, and relate these to the equation.
PROCEDURE

Step 1: Background and Preparation: Cuneiform is one of the earliest systems of writing, first coming into use in Sumer around 3300 BCE. Cuneiform means “wedge-shaped,” named for the appearance of the marks first used to record the tokens representing items exchanged in a barter economy. A helpful description of the development of cuneiform writing can be found at http://www.ancientscripts.com/sumerian.html. The Library of Congress’s online presentation from its Cuneiform Tablets: From the Reign of Gudea of Lagash to Shalmanassar III collection includes many examples of cuneiform writing.

Step 2: Ask students what, if any, symbolic recording methods they use. (For instance, tick marks to keep track of a game score.) Have any of your students heard of cuneiform before? Show them one or all three of the cuneiform tablets listed in the Resources section below, and ask them what they observe. Have them fill out the first column of the Primary Source Analysis Tool. Make sure to point out what items each tablet records on the bibliographic pages before they fill out the “reflect” and “question” columns. Ask students if they can decipher anything on these tablets. For instance, can they determine which symbols stand for each number and each type of animal on the first three lines of the Receipt of livestock?

Step 3: Explain to students that they will be creating their own symbolic writing system to use for writing out a receipt. Pass out the Cuneiform Activity Worksheet. Allow students time to look over the worksheet and ask questions, and then give them the rest of the class time to work. Assign the completion of the worksheet as homework if necessary. Students can then share their writing systems with their classmates and explain how they came up with them.

RESOURCES

- Accounting tablet [2200-1900bc]
- Bill of sale [ca 2038 B.C.]
- Receipt of livestock [2047 B.C]
**Cuneiform Activity Worksheet**

NAME______________________________   INITIALS IN CUNEIFORM_________________________

1. Using the “Write Like A Babylonian” web tool at [http://www.penn.museum/cgi/cuneiform.cgi](http://www.penn.museum/cgi/cuneiform.cgi), record your initials in cuneiform on the line above.

2. Imagine your own symbols for each number 1-9 and for three barter items. Remember that they should be easy to draw, and easily distinguishable from one another.

<p>| | | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. Imagine you have bartered your wares for three other types of items from two different people. Decide what types of items and how many of each you have received:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Person #1</th>
<th>Person #2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Item #1:</td>
<td>Item #1:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item #2:</td>
<td>Item #2:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Item #3:</td>
<td>Item #3:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. Record your trades in the boxes, first in Arabic numerals and English, and then in the symbols you created above. Make sure to total the number of each type of item.

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>Symbols</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>