

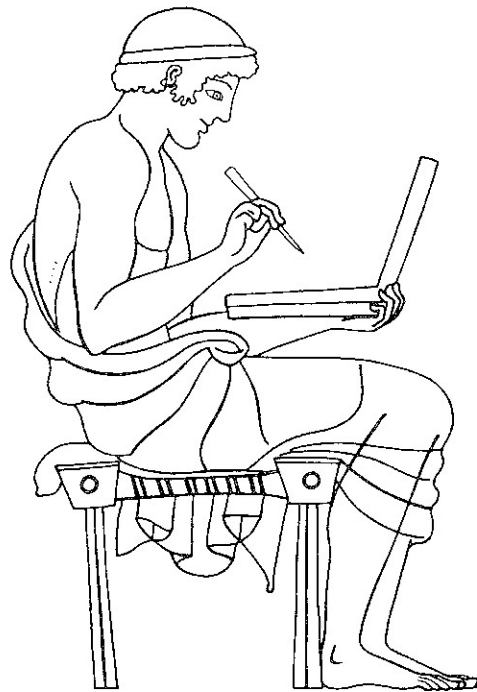


Alpha, Beta, Alphabet



When you learned to read and write in English, you started by learning the alphabet. Did you ever wonder where that alphabet came from?

An **alphabet** is a writing system that uses one symbol for each sound in the language. The symbols can be combined to represent different words. The world's earliest writing systems didn't use this system. Some of them used a different symbol for each word. Some of them used a symbol for each syllable. Then, around 1100 B.C., the Phoenicians, a seafaring people in the Mediterranean, developed a different approach. They came up with 22 symbols for individual sounds: the first alphabet.



A Greek scribe

The Phoenicians traded all around the Mediterranean. Contact with the Greeks was bound to come. At some point—historians aren't sure when—the Greeks started to use the Phoenician alphabet. They also changed it. The 22 symbols of the Phoenician alphabet were all consonants; there were no symbols for vowels. Readers had to figure out what the vowel sounds should be. Somehow, as the Greeks adopted the alphabet, some of the sounds changed from consonants to vowels, and some new signs were added. The names for the letters changed, too. The first two sounds in the Phoenician alphabet had been *aleph* and *beth*. In Greek they became *alpha* and *beta*—which eventually led to our word “alphabet.”

Here are the letters of the classical Greek alphabet, with their names and the closest corresponding English sound.

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Alpha, Beta, Alphabet *(continued)*

<u>Capital Letter</u>	<u>Small Letter</u>	<u>Name</u>	<u>Sound in English</u>
A	α	alpha	a
B	β	beta	b
Γ	γ	gamma	g
Δ	δ	delta	d
E	ε	epsilon	e (as in "get")
Z	ζ	zeta	z, sd (as in "wisdom")
H	η	eta	e (as in "hair")
Θ	θ	theta	th (as in "think")
I	ι	iota	i (as in "peep")
K	κ	kappa	k, c (as in "cat")
Λ	λ	lambda	l
M	μ	mu	m
N	ν	nu	n
Ξ	ξ	xi	x, ks
O	ο	omicron	o (as in "pot")
Π	π	pi	p
P	ρ	rho	r
Σ	σ, ζ*	sigma	s *(written ζ when last letter of word)
T	τ	tau	t
Υ	υ	upsilon	u, y
Φ	φ	phi	ph, f
X	χ	chi	kh
Ψ	ψ	psi	ps
Ω	ω	omega	o (as in "paw")

Although our alphabet developed from the Greek alphabet, some of their symbols are confusing. The symbol for **rho**, the Greek "r" sound, is ρ—it looks like our symbol for "p." The symbol for **omega**, the long "o" sound, is ω—it looks like our "w." And some Greek symbols, like ψ and φ, don't look like any of our letters.

Also, the Greeks didn't have a separate symbol for the "h" sound. Instead, they made a mark like an apostrophe before a vowel to show the "h." So the word 'Ερμης would be pronounced "Hermes."



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Alpha, Beta, Alphabet (continued)

Practice writing the Greek symbols. Here are a few Greek words. Try copying them using the Greek letters. Then write them out using the closest English letters. Do these words look familiar to you now?

α ρ ο μ α	_____	_____
α σ θ μ α	_____	_____
δ ι λ ε μ μ α	_____	_____
δ ι π λ ο μ α	_____	_____
δ ρ α μ α	_____	_____
κ ι ν ε μ α	_____	_____
κ ο μ μ α	_____	_____
π ρ ο β λ ε μ α	_____	_____

Even though some of the symbols are very different, Greek letters can be used to write most of the sounds in English. Some English letters are missing from the Greek alphabet. Use these Greek letters instead.

For j, use ι

For c, use κ or σ (depending on whether the sound should be hard or soft)

For v, use φ

For w, use ου

For y, use ι or εϋ

Example: We walked to school today.

Ουι ουαλκδ τυ σκυλ τεδη.

Prepare a simple English sentence. Now use Greek symbols to write out the words. Write the Greek sentence neatly on a separate piece of paper. Then exchange sentences with a partner. Can you read your partner's sentence?

Bonus: Many Greek symbols are still used in one area of knowledge today. Which area is that?

