Make Your Own Cuneiform Tablet

Have you ever wondered about how ancient people learned to write? In ancient Mesopotamia, the Sumerian people used a writing system made up of wedge-shaped marks called cuneiform. Instead of pencils and paper, they used carved reeds as styluses, which they would press into the surface of clay tablets to make their marks.

Mesopotamian students would attend scribe schools to practice cuneiform writing. Many of the clay tablets in the Penn Museum's collection show how students would begin their learning by writing the same basic symbols repeatedly:

As their skills improved, students would start practicing whole words and phrases, usually by copying a sentence the teacher would print first. Many of these tablets are rectangular, but some are round, and still have palm prints preserved in the surface:

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School exercise tablet found in Nippur

School exercise tablet found in Nippur

"Lentil"-shaped school tablet found in Nippur
Make Your Own Cuneiform Tablet

**Activity:** You can make your own cuneiform tablet out of air-dry clay. If you don’t have any clay around the house, you can make your own following a recipe online like this one.

**STEP 1:** Roll your clay into a ball that fits in the palm of your hand.

**STEP 2:** Squish it flat into your hand. Don’t make it too thin!

**STEP 3:** Use corner of the flat end of your stylus (such a wooden chopstick) to practice pressing basic triangle shapes and into the surface of your tablet. Students in Mesopotamia spent a lot of time practicing, so don’t be discouraged if you have some trouble. Just roll your clay into a ball and start again!

Try copying these cuneiform words:

![Mountain](image)

![Bird](image)

![Fish](image)

Enter your name here on the Penn Museum website to see your name in cuneiform. Practice writing it on your clay tablet.

Want to know more about Mesopotamian Scribe School? Check out this How Do We Know article.