

## Traditional Egyptian writing surfaces



Archaeological evidence suggests that Ancient Egyptians wrote on pottery, wooden boards, leather and most famously papyrus. Writing tools were often made of reeds cut obliquely and then chewed to make a brush-like tip. Natural black and red pigments were used as well as minerals like lapis lazuli.

Most learners will be aware of Egyptian hieroglyphics. The development, discovery, meaning and translation of this “Egyptian Alphabet” could form a rich topic for research. The discovery of the Rosetta Stone during Napoleon’s Egyptian Campaign and the work subsequently carried out by scholars, including Jean-François Champollion, makes a fascinating story. For more information listen to the [podcast about Napoleon in Egypt](#).

Having done some research into Egyptian writing techniques, learners can then produce a writing surface using a similar method to the way that papyrus was produced. This can then be inscribed and decorated using hieroglyphs and traditional colours and images. Learners may wish to research the life of a scribe and make a traditional scribe’s costume.

Learners could then make paper in the traditional way, using a hand-made deckle and mould. They could compare the two and research modern paper making techniques. Learners could consider the future of paper in the digital age: what evidence will future archaeologists uncover?



## What is papyrus?

Many learners may be aware of papyrus and its use by the Ancient Egyptians. Many may have seen modern versions of the type often sold to tourists (these are sometimes produced on banana leaves and not actually papyrus!).

Papyrus was manufactured from the pith of the papyrus plant, *Cyperus papyrus*, a wetland reed once abundant in the Nile Delta of Egypt. It has unusual triangular stems. Papyrus is first known to have been used in ancient Egypt (at least as far back as the First dynasty), but it was also used throughout the Mediterranean region. Ancient Egyptians used this plant as a writing material (but evidence shows that it was also used to make rope, mats, baskets and even boats).

Papyrus shares a similar composition to paper (which is made from wood pulp) being composed of cellulose, lignin, minerals and water.



Ancient Egyptians would have gathered the papyrus reeds and extracted the pith, cutting it into pieces around 40cm in length. They would then have laid it in a criss-cross formation and pounded the surface to bind the fibres together.

They would have weighed the papyrus down as it dried. The papyrus would then have been “polished” by rubbing with a smooth stone or seashell. It would then be suitable for writing or painting upon by a scribe. The finished papyrus would then have been rolled up into a scroll. Scrolls of papyrus are light and easily transported and stored.

Papyrus survives well in hot, dry conditions and examples have survived for many centuries. The oldest written papyrus known to be in existence is, according to Kenyon (*The Paleography of Greek Papyri*, Oxford, 1899), an account-sheet belonging to the reign of the Egyptian king Assa, which may date back to around 2600 B.C!

