We take writing very much for granted, even in an age when we are also bombarded by sound and visual images. It is easy for us to see how useful writing is and hard to think of life without it. But what exactly is it? Why was it invented? And did the ancient Greeks and Romans use it differently from us?

Writing and language are two separate phenomena. Writing is the symbolic representation of language. But the same form of writing or script can be used to write different languages; and the same language can be written with different letter forms or scripts. So, for example, the Linear B tablet in Case I is written in Greek, but a very different form of Greek from the potters’ signatures on vases in Case 6.

Writing arises from the need for complex types of communication, and it also encourages these. The introduction of writing is characteristic of societies in which social structures have outgrown the point where one person can instruct or report to another immediately and directly, by word of mouth. This situation is thought to have been true of the Late Bronze Age Aegean, the world of the Linear B tablets, where the need had arisen to record business transactions, sometimes complex, between one individual or group and another.

Even when writing was quite well established in the ancient world there were many contexts in which it did not replace the spoken word. In Classical Athens of the 5th and 4th century BC, inscribing political decisions on stone (see the examples near Case 6) served to publicise and so open them up to public scrutiny. But written laws supplemented,
rather than replacing, the unwritten laws of custom and practice. There is also evidence to suggest that for many people the spoken word was more important than the written. Political debate was purely oral, and politicians were described as rhetors, meaning ‘speakers’. Philosophy, too, progressed through discussion rather than through writing. In Plato’s dialogue *Phaedrus*, Socrates claims that writing makes people forgetful and lacks the flexibility of the spoken word: unlike speech, it can only signify the same thing over and over again. And writing was often regarded as ill-omened or unlucky: in Greek tragedy, written messages invariably bring bad news.

In the later Greek and Roman periods the use of writing developed in ways more familiar to us today, becoming important, for example, as a tool of political propaganda or control. The inscription to the right of Case 11 records gold wreaths and other honours offered by numerous Greek cities to an otherwise unknown but clearly influential individual named Cassander: the cities involved appear to have felt that this written advertisement of their admiration would encourage Cassander to offer them his support. Small-scale inscriptions could also carry a political message: Roman coins (see Case 12), exchanged for goods and services on the most distant borders of the empire, brought not just the image of the emperor but also short written ‘news flashes’ that relayed his power and achievements to subjects who would never meet him face to face. Here, for example, the Emperor Claudius broadcasts his conquest of Britain with a triumphal chariot above the caption ‘De Britannis’.

Inscription of an honourific decree on marble, found in Alexandria Troas, modern Turkey. Inscribed about 165 BC. (GR.6.1854)

Silver coin of the Emperor Claudius (Case 12 no. 40). Made at Caesarea, Cappadocia about AD 43–48. (CM.98-1929)

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