

The Alphabet

David Sacks

Chapter 1

Little Letters, Big Idea

Ask people to name the most consequential inventions of world history, and you'll hear a list probably including the wheel, the telephone, the atomic bomb, the first computing machine. (Comedian Mel Brooks, in his 1960s audio skit "The Two-Thousand-Year-Old Man," claimed the greatest invention was Saran Wrap.) What might be missing from the answers, overlooked, is the family of little shapes that your eyes are scanning right now: the letters of the alphabet. For the alphabet was an invention, a spectacularly successful one. Judged on longevity and extent of modern daily use, it compares with the wheel.

The alphabet was invented in Egypt around 2000 B.C. as a writing method to show sounds of words. Without doubt, its earliest readers read aloud, their lips forming the words displayed. (Reading aloud continued to be standard practice throughout ancient and medieval times.) The alphabet was not the earliest writing: Egypt, Mesopotamia, and probably China already had nonalphabetic systems. But the alphabet was the most efficient writing system ever found, before or since. Like the wheel, it transformed the ancient world, and, like the wheel, it is still with us and has never been superseded.

Today about 4.8 billion people, over three-quarters of humanity, live in countries that use an alphabet or a writing system modified from an alphabet. About 26 major alphabetic scripts are in place worldwide. The International Three are the Roman, Arabic, and Cyrillic alphabets, each serving multiple nations and languages.

Our own familiar alphabet is the Roman, bequeathed to Western Europe by the Roman Empire and today the most popular script on Earth—weighing in at about 100 languages, 120 countries, and nearly 2 billion users worldwide. The Roman alphabet owes its statistical dominance partly to its use by Spanish (330 million native speakers worldwide), by Portuguese (160 million native speakers), and by the languages of Central and Southern Africa (270 million speakers) as well as by English (350 million native speakers). There are variations of the Roman alphabet: For example, English employs 26 letters; Finnish, 21; Croatian, 30. But at the core are the 23 letters of ancient Rome. (The Romans lacked J, V, and W.)

Amazingly, with the sole exception of Korea's Hangul script (invented in isolation in the mid-1400s A.D.), all of today's alphabetic scripts have a common origin. All can be traced back through history to one source: the first Near Eastern alphabet of 2000 B.C. The family ties are direct and actual. Our Roman alphabet is a third cousin to the Arabic alphabet, a second cousin to the Cyrillic alphabet, and a grandchild of the Greek alphabet. True, different alphabets don't usually look alike (although nearly half of our capital letters strongly resemble their Greek "grandparents"). But

alphabets reveal their kinship in general principles and in their sequences of letter sounds. References to “the alphabet,” in this chapter particularly, are meant to include any working alphabet, present or past, such as the Phoenician and Aramaic as well as our own.

The remaining one-quarter of Earth’s population, 1.4 billion people, use nonalphabetic writing. Basically this means China, including Taiwan, and Japan. The Japanese system comes from an adaptation of the Chinese that dates back to the 600s A.D.

What’s the big difference? Why doesn’t Chinese writing qualify as an alphabet? In Chinese script, each symbol denotes a whole word of the Mandarin Chinese language. We call such symbols “logograms” (from two Greek roots meaning “word letter”). A Chinese symbol is primarily not phonetic; it does not operate by conveying sound. Rather, it conveys the idea behind the word. A few symbols actually show their subject as a stylized picture, like the third one in the chart. That sort of symbol qualifies both as a logogram and as a pictograph (meaning “picture writing”).