

Handwritten shorthand symbols on a blue-lined background.

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Stone Age

I remember once seeing a cartoon drawing of a Stone Age office man sitting behind his stone desk, talking to a colleague about his new female employee who was busy with hammer and chisel, carving a business letter onto a large upright slab of stone: "Smashing new secretary, just look at her biceps!" The picture duly showed the girl working away, a svelte figure clothed in a skimpy Stone Age dress, but with bulging arm muscles. All three characters were smiling widely in satisfaction with the situation.

I longed to tell them how it could all be done so much more quickly with different materials. All my sentences would begin with the word "but." But you could make a pen from a feather, or a brush from a splayed twig. But you could make ink out of soot. But you could make a writing surface from hides, bark, clay or wax. I think maybe they would reply that they already have sufficient technology and skill to get the job done, in the time frame that they are used to, and that I am indulging in flights of fancy that have no place in their world.

Our capital letters are based on the Roman alphabet, which was designed to be carved in stone, and this is the origin of the serifs, which are the narrow pointed marks at the ends, clear evidence of the use of a chisel in creating the corners of each separate line. Stone inscriptions and carefully produced illuminated manuscripts do not always reflect the handwriting style of the day which would have been a much more cursive version, using reed pens, quills or brushes on papyrus, parchment, vellum or paper. Throughout history people have also used fragments of broken pottery which provided a small but smooth surface for short notes. The letters changed over time in order to represent the different languages for which they were used. Even today there is a big difference between the shape of our formal letters, as used in printing, signs or monuments, and the more flowing handwritten forms.

Computer and database users look back in amusement at the typewriter and the card index system. Typists look back to the clerk with his quill pen and rows of handwritten accounts books. The Victorian clerk may have mused upon how modern his methods were, compared with the ancient process of pressing marks into wet clay and baking the tablets. As a shorthand writer, you may recognise this as how you now feel about longhand. Maybe you look on, with a combination of kindly sympathy and gritted teeth, as people write laboriously, gripping their biro or pencil in finger-cramping unergonomic contortions, struggling to maintain neat and readable writing yet wanting to get it done quickly. The joined-up longhand that we so eagerly awaited permission to use at school has now been surpassed in speed and convenience by our new shorthand skill, and we are in the wonderful position of having a choice, depending on the purpose of the writing.

Stone Age

Returning to our three friends living in the Stone Age with their ancient and hideously slow method of writing, one does have to admit that it gets the job done, eventually. Having learned and written that way all their lives and being surrounded by it all the time, they probably cannot imagine or visualise any other way of carrying out this task. They may have some inkling that time is slipping through their fingers, that more could be done if only the inscriptions were easier to produce. They have probably resigned themselves to their methods and may think that, having learned it so thoroughly, there is no point in changing to some other system. They cannot imagine that the time and energy spent mastering another way of writing could be redeemed by any saving that would be made. They use their system through blunt necessity and they do not have a choice of ways to write. But maybe this is a little harsh on them, and it could be that they are really just the same as us, willing to jump enthusiastically on any new invention that might get them ahead of their competitors.

We don't have to invent paper, concoct ink, or create fountain pens or nibs, or even put together some sort of shorthand system that will be accurate, free of ambiguities that produce errors, and not reliant on memory or guesswork. All this has been done for us over many years, and is in our toolbox of useful equipment, waiting to be picked up and used. I think I shall reserve the Stone Age for just the occasional flying visit, and I will take my pen and pad with me in case I get the chance to win them over with a demonstration. I just hope I don't find a half-ton letter from them crashing through my letterbox! (817 words)