The Origins of Writing

Writing was ‘invented’ independently at different times in the world – in Mesopotamia, Egypt, China and Mesoamerica.

The oldest known evidence of writing was discovered in the south of Egypt, at Umm el-Qa’ab (Abydos) and dates to about 3250 BC. The stimulus to ‘invent’ writing in Egypt was the need to communicate over long distances for reasons of government and trade.

The Egyptian writing system was not initially designed to convey continuous speech or to reproduce complete sentences. Early Egyptian texts commonly consist of a series of entries or lists detailing the deliveries of goods, investments, business transactions and administrative information. However, early writing in Egypt was not seen as purely functional. Since only a minority were able to read and write, writing served as a means for cultural and elite display.