Reading and writing for business and pleasure were part of daily life in Ancient Egypt. The Egyptians wrote letters and their literary works included poems, ceremonial texts and hymns, and the biographies of prominent government officials. However, the overall literacy rate was possibly less than one percent of the entire population. Most Egyptians relied on professional scribes to transmit everyday thoughts, problems and priorities into writing.

It was not until the early Middle Kingdom (2100 – 1700 BC) that the Egyptians started to write narrative literature. The rise of an intellectual class of scribes, new ideas about individuality, increased levels of literacy and access to written materials were the reasons behind this new approach to writing.

The Egyptians wrote on papyrus (writing sheets made from the fibres of the papyrus plant) and chips of limestone and pottery known as ostraca. Much of this writing was not meant to be kept for eternity, so these texts were often thrown away. However, they survived, buried for thousands of years in the settlements on the dry desert margins of Egypt. The Egyptians also inscribed objects that were meant to last, such as burial goods and precious jewellery.