

*This is a prospectus. The full syllabus will be uploaded on the course website.

VISIBLE LANGUAGE: HISTORY OF WRITING SYSTEMS

NELC 0012
MW 12:00 – 1:30pm

Prof. Tim Hogue
thogue@sas.upenn.edu

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Perhaps more than any other technology, writing has driven human social development and cognitive evolution. Writing fundamentally changes the way we think. Today, however, writing has become mostly invisible: it is a basic skill for children to master rather than a revolution in human ingenuity. This course will introduce students to the story of writing from its invention at multiple times and places across the globe to its ubiquity in our modern, global society. Each module will begin with what we can reconstruct of the invention and decipherment of each writing system under study. We will then turn to a consideration of each system's hardware (surfaces, tools, techniques, etc.) and software (social and cognitive applications).

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this course, students will be able to

1. Categorize writing systems as logographic, logosyllabic, syllabic, alphabetic, or featural.
2. Engage with the material processes of writing, including the distinct tools and surfaces favored by different systems in various cultural settings.
3. Reenact the invention of writing by creating their own original writing system.
4. Analyze applications of writing using the basic principles of the sociolinguistics of writing and archaeological approaches to inscribed artifacts.
5. Document inscribed artifacts using current archaeological methods.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

1. Attendance and Participation (15%) – This includes completing assigned readings (up to 20-30 pages per session) before the class for which they are assigned. This also includes participating in scribal workshops, in which the students are tasked with learning the basics of each writing system under study (e.g., by pressing Cuneiform signs into clay, carving ancient Chinese characters into bones, painting Mayan glyphs, inking Egyptian hieroglyphs, etc.).
2. Quizzes (20%) – These will be offered exclusively online and will test students' retention of major concepts from each module.
3. Project #1 (30%) – Students will work in groups to invent their own writing system for representing English. Students are encouraged to be creative, but they are not permitted to use the resources of our current system (alphabetic characters, paper, pen, pencil, etc.).
4. Project #2 (35%) – Students will digitally document an inscribed artifact housed in the Penn Museum. Any modern archaeological method is acceptable, but students are especially encouraged to explore the use of photogrammetry and LIDAR to create 3D models or RTI scanning. Students will also analyze said artifact and present their research in written or audio/visual form.