



Decoding Ancient Egyptian Hieroglyphs

For thousands of years, the Ancient Egyptian language was used to write stories, spells and records on papyrus scrolls and the walls of tombs and temples. Over time, the language was slowly forgotten until a large broken stone was found in the Nile Delta. This became known as the Rosetta Stone and was the key to cracking the code of Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs.

The Rosetta Stone was special because it had the same text written in three different types of writing. There were Ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs at the top, Demotic Egyptian in the middle and Ancient Greek at the bottom. People could still understand Greek so everyone knew what the hieroglyphs must say. The Greek section was a royal decree but how could little pictures of birds and snakes in the hieroglyphic section translate to something so unrelated to animals?

Say what you see!

Hieroglyphs are little pictures of animals and objects. The good thing about this is that if you wanted to write about a thing that you can easily draw, like a bull or a loaf of bread, you could just draw it and leave it at that. If you wanted to write about many loaves of bread you could draw three loaves (or draw three lines after your picture of bread to save time), the Ancient Egyptian version of adding an 's' to the end of a word.

The Ancient Egyptians did use hieroglyphs in this way, but you would struggle to write anything more interesting than a shopping list if that were the only way hieroglyphs could be used. How could you write words like 'dream' or 'excellent' that can't be drawn? Well, the Ancient Egyptians found a way!

In English if you saw:



You could read the two pictures together as 'bee-leaf' or 'belief'.

Here, the names of the pictured objects are used as sounds to write another word. Ancient Egyptian worked in the same way. The little picture signs stand for sounds that could be put together to create words and sentences.

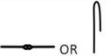
An Ancient Egyptian 'Alphabet'

Some hieroglyphs represent a single sound, just like letters in English. The Ancient Egyptians only wrote down the consonants and not the vowels in their words so no-one knows exactly how Ancient Egyptian sounded. When Egyptologists read hieroglyphs out loud they often add in 'e' sounds to make the consonants easier to say and hear.



Ancient Egypt

Try writing your name or a message in hieroglyphs. Remember to focus on the *sounds* that make up your name or phrase rather than the letters used to write it in English. As the Ancient Egyptians didn't use vowels you can either miss them out or use the sign closest to the sound of the vowel you want to write.

Hieroglyph	What is it?	How does it sound?
	Vulture	Short A
	Reed	I
	Two Reeds OR Two Strokes	Y
	Arm	Long A
	Quail Chick	W (U or OO)
	Leg	B
	Mat or Stool	P
	Horned Viper	F (Or V)
	Owl	M
	Water	N
	Mouth	R
	Reed Shelter	H
	Twisted Flax	A breathy H from in your throat
	Possibly Placenta?	Like lo <u>ch</u>
	Animal Belly	Like in German <u>ich</u>
	Door Bolt OR Folded Cloth	S/Z (OR Soft C)
	Pool	SH
	Hill	Q
	Basket with Handle	K (Or Hard C)
	Jar Stand	G
	Bread	T
	Tethering Rope	CH
	Hand	D
	Cobra	J



Ancient Egypt

If your name has an L an O or an X in it you will have noticed that there are no hieroglyphs for these sounds in the table. When Greek rulers, who had names like Alexander, Ptolemy and Cleopatra, took over Egypt in 332 BCE they realised that they had the same problem. What were you supposed to do if the country you are ruling can't even write your name? The solution was to make the best of the hieroglyphs that did exist. For an X, they combined a K and an S to form the right sound while the lion, which was earlier a 'rw' sound, became an L and the lasso, which used to be 'wa', became an O.

Hieroglyph	What is it?	How does it sound?
	Lion	L
	Lasso	O
	Basket & Door Bolt	X (KS)

While we only have 26 different letters in English, the Ancient Egyptians used hundreds of different signs. As well as the hieroglyphs that stood for a single sound, there are also many signs that represented combinations of two or even three sounds.

Hidden Clues

If you look at a hieroglyphic inscription, you will notice that there aren't any spaces or punctuation, such as full stops or commas. Instead, all the signs are written in one long line. This means that it isn't obvious at a glance where words start and end.

There is another type of hieroglyph that helps with this. These don't represent a sound but instead come at the end of a word to give you a clue as to how the word should be understood. For example, if you had a person's name you could draw a picture of a person afterwards or if the word were supposed to be a verb, you could draw some legs.

Here is an example in English:



This could be misread as being something to do with flowers and leaves.



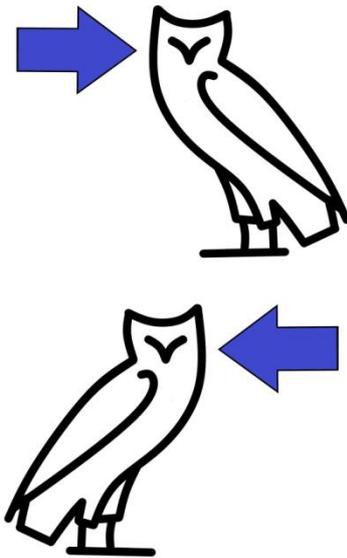
The Ancient Egyptians used single sound signs to clarify meaning too

However, if we had extra pictures like the Ancient Egyptians did they show that the flower is a girl's name and that the 'bee-leaves' is a verb to do with thinking. So, we can read it as "Poppy Believes You".

A Heads Up

As if all of that wasn't hard enough, there is also the small problem of which direction to read the hieroglyphs. They could be written from left to right or right to left, so how are you supposed to know that you aren't reading an inscription backwards?

Fortunately, there is an easy trick to find out in which direction you should be reading the hieroglyphs. Look for a hieroglyph with a face, like a person or a bird and read into their face.



Next time you are at a museum and you see a hieroglyphic inscription you can impress friends and family by telling them all about hieroglyphs!