

78 - Paper

Believe it or not, paper didn't exist when humans first started writing about 5500 years ago. So, where did paper come from? How is it made? And do we have too much of it right now?

When humans first started writing, people pressed symbols into clay tablets. Those thick tablets were not easy to carry around, and, because you couldn't fold them, they weren't very good for making airplanes.

The ancient Egyptians eventually came up with a material called Papyrus, which was made from a grass-like plant that grows along the Nile river. Egyptians used the plant's stem to make a paper-like writing material that became very popular in ancient Egypt, Greece and the Roman Empire. The word "paper" actually comes from the Greek and Latin words for "papyrus." But unlike paper, which is strong and can last hundreds of years, papyrus fell apart very easily.

So, the Europeans created something called parchment, which was much stronger than Papyrus. They took the skin from a dead animal, cleaned it, dried it, stretched it, and scraped it. It was a lot of work for writing material. And it wasn't cheap, either. It could take up to 200 animals to make one book!

When it comes to modern paper - the Chinese, Arabs, Americans, and Europeans all had a hand in its creation. The Chinese made paper with materials such as bamboo, hemp, tree bark, and old fishing nets. For centuries, the secret to paper-making remained a secret outside of Asia. But then, in the 8th century, military forces from the area now known as Iraq, conquered part of Asia and soon the word was out about paper.

The Middle Easterners perfected the paper-making process as they spread it throughout their growing empire. They used paper to spread their knowledge of medicine, mathematics, agriculture, literature and other subjects. When the Middle Eastern people conquered the region that is now Spain, paper-making arrived in Europe.

The Europeans made a huge impact on paper making as well, when, in the mid-1400's, a German named Johannes Gutenberg developed a printing press with moveable type that allowed books and other publications to be printed faster, cheaper, and more easily. Soon paper was in huge demand throughout the world, and paper-making technology spread to the Americas when European colonists settled there.

Things You Will Learn

1. What did people write on before paper?
2. How was paper made?
3. What are the many uses for paper and how did it change the world?

Activities

1. The Gutenberg Press worked by stamping paper. Check out [these](#) fun stamping activities. Make sure you get permission from an adult because paint can be messy.
2. Most Europeans couldn't read during the Middle Ages... but you sure can! Read a book! It can be a favorite or something new. Then write a paragraph describing the story you read on... paper!
3. The first books were used to help spread knowledge about the travels of adventurers. You can make your own book! Ask an adult to help you create a book by stapling paper together or use an empty notebook. Now that you have a book, what story would you like to tell? Are you going to write a book about your adventures, or make up a crazy story about chicken nuggets taking over the world?

Additional Resources

Grab an adult and make your own paper! You are going to need some special equipment and some cutting items so this might be a good activity for when your adult has lots of time to create with you. [Here](#) are directions for making your own paper ornaments.

Kid News

When was the last time you had an accident? Did you spill water on the floor or give yourself a paper cut? A huge ship recently got stuck in the Suez Canal. The ship is a quarter of a mile long and was loaded with 485 million pounds of goods headed for the Netherlands. Because it's so big, the ship was hard to move. It was blocking thousands of ships trying to go through the narrow Suez Canal. They eventually got it unstuck after a few days but you can read about this strange boat accident [here](#).¹

¹ This activity guide is for the Who Smarted? podcast www.WhoSmarted.com