

**THE BEGINNING OF  
CIVILIZATION IN SUMER:  
THE ADVENT OF  
WRITTEN COMMUNICATION**

**A UNIT OF STUDY FOR GRADES 5-8**

**BY**

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## **TEACHER BACKGROUND MATERIALS**

### **I. UNIT OVERVIEW**

**T**he purpose of this unit is to introduce students to the achievements and historical significance of the Sumerian civilization, located in the “land between the rivers,” Mesopotamia, the region known today as modern Iraq, and reaching back in time to approximately 3500 B.C.

The unit is divided into five sections. The first three sections concentrate on historical readiness activities and concepts, geographical-historical awareness, and an overview of recognized “firsts” in Sumerian civilization. The last two sections focus upon the most significant achievement of the Sumerians, the development and use of a written language, and provide an in-depth exploration of this ancient writing system and the life of an average scribe.

The unit aims to help students develop an awareness of and an appreciation for the uniquely human achievement of written communication, and provides students with a concept of historical “firsts,” guiding the students to understand the interrelationship between geography, human adaptation, human lifestyles and historical change. The unit should encompass a 4-6 week period of time and is directed at a student audience of ages 11-14.

All events prior to the innovation of writing have been labeled “prehistory.” With the invention of a conventional system of writing, human knowledge was no longer dependent upon the capacity of an individual’s memory. It became possible to accumulate a record of human experience, transcending specific time and place limitations of oral speech. In developing the ancient system of cuneiform, the Sumerian culture provided a foundation upon which all subsequent intellectual and technological progress has been built.

### **II. UNIT CONTEXT**

**T**his unit should follow a unit on Prehistory, examining man as a hunter and gatherer and the subsequent advent of agriculture and farming. It should precede unit studies of other ancient civilizations and/or early Mediterranean civilizations.

### **III. CORRELATION TO NATIONAL STANDARDS FOR UNITED STATES HISTORY**

*The Beginning of Civilization in Sumer: The Advent of Written Communication* provides teaching materials that address standards as outlined in *National Standards for History, Basic Edition* (National Center for History in the Schools, 1996), **Era 2**. Lessons in this teaching unit specifically address **Standard 1A** that asks students to compare forms of writing that developed in early civilizations and explain how written records shaped political, legal, religious, and cultural life.

This unit likewise integrates a number of Historical Thinking Standards including: “draw upon data in historical maps” (**Standard 2, Historical Comprehension**); “draw comparisons across eras and regions” (**Standard 3, Historical Analysis and Interpretation**); “obtain historical data from a variety of sources;” and “support interpretations with historical evidence” (**Standard 4, Historical Research.**)

### **IV. UNIT OBJECTIVES**

1. To explore the concepts of continuity, change and historical firsts by creating and discussing personal and/or familial timelines.
2. To examine maps of the present day Middle East and then identify the general area of the ancient Fertile Crescent and the specific area known as ancient Sumer.
3. To discuss climatic conditions, land forms and water sources of the and discover the physical, social, and economic ramifications of these geographical conditions, including the development of an extensive irrigation system, the adaptation of shelter needs to existing natural resources, and the formation of city-states.
4. To learn the importance and unique nature of written communication by participating in activities and discussion.
5. To examine a moment in time via primary source documents on the life of a scribe. Make generalizations on the role and use of writing in the Sumerian civilizations by participating in a role-playing activity.

6. To study the evolution of the ancient writing system, cuneiform, and explore writing systems in general by creating their own communication codes.

## **V. LESSON PLANS**

1. Readiness: What Is History?
2. Geographical Discussion
3. Achievements of Sumer
4. The Life of a Scribe
5. The Beginnings of Written Communication

## **VI. INTRODUCTION TO THE BEGINNING OF CIVILIZATION IN SUMER: THE ADVENT OF WRITTEN COMMUNICATION**

**B**etween the development of villages and the development of cities, man made some great technological advances. Some of these have been described in the unit on the Neolithic Revolution. Early farmers formed mud and clay into mudbricks for building houses and walls; they manipulated and fired clay to form pottery; they learned to burn limestone and gypsum to 'nix with water to form plaster; they walled in their settlements for protection; they made finer and more complex stone tools. The developments took place slowly, over hundreds or thousands of years, but in each case 'man was becoming more skillful at manipulating for his own use the materials available in the environment.

A major step forward came when villagers discovered how to divert water from rivers and springs to irrigate their crops. This released men and women from the necessity of living in areas with abundant rainfall. Some of them moved into river valleys with dry climates, which were the eventual sites of almost all the major early civilizations of the world, such as that of Egypt on the Nile, Mesopotamia between the 'Tigris and Euphrates, India on the Indus, and China on the Yellow River.

By 5000 B.C. small settlements dependent on irrigation agriculture were established throughout southern Mesopotamia. The effort of digging and maintaining canals would have been too great for one man or even for one family; a community effort must have been required. However, this was not in itself adequate incentive (as was once thought) for urban culture to develop. The small settlements continued for hundreds of years before the beginnings of urbanization.

Between approximately 4000 and 3000 B.C. a series of major technological changes took place in the southern settlements, ultimately leading to urban civilization. The plow was invented, permitting each farmer to support a larger number of people through his efforts; the wheel made possible wagons and greater pottery production; metals were smelted and formed into tools, utensils, and weapons, the shapes of which had been impossible in stone. Meanwhile, existing technologies were developed on a larger scale: mudbrick was used to build monumental fortifications and structures, wider

and deeper canals were dug and maintained. By the end of the period scribes throughout Mesopotamia were using a uniform written script to record the details of administration of the new cities.

The order in which these changes took place is unclear, as is the stimulus for them. As is true of all historical events, it is highly unlikely that a single cause can be determined. A set of conditions, including, no doubt, the climate, the natural resources of the region, the technological sophistication of the inhabitants, the productivity of the soil, and so on, combined to entice men and women to live in larger communities and to join forces for their common good. Behind all their cooperative effort we can detect a central government in each city, organizing manpower and resources in the interests of the welfare of the city and its gods.

The earliest Mesopotamian documents are written in pictographic script which could represent any language. The script later became partly syllabic; that is, writers attempted in some places to render the sounds of the language, and at this point historians can recognize the language as Sumerian. Sumerian was the predominant written language until after 2000 B.C. From earliest times, however, it is clear that not all Mesopotamians spoke Sumerian. Some of the names in the texts are of people who spoke a Semitic language called Akkadian. Akkadian is related to modern Arabic and Hebrew and became the principal written and spoken language in Mesopotamia after 2000 B.C. Throughout the third millennium B.C., the Akkadian speakers and Sumerian speakers seem to have shared the land in harmony with one another, the Sumerians dominating the southern half of the country, and the Akkadians dominating the north.

In this unit students will learn about the principal achievements of early Sumerian city-dwellers, and especially about their system of writing which was spread throughout Mesopotamia and ultimately beyond by means of what seems to have been a standardized school curriculum.

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**DRAMATIC MOMENT**  
**An Argument Between Two School Rowdies**  
**(Primary Source)**

Two school graduates, named Enkimansi and Girnishag exchange insults:

**Enkimansi:**

You dolt, numbskill, school pest, you illiterate, you Sumerian ignoramus, your hand is terrible; it cannot even hold the stylus properly; it is unfit for writing and cannot take dictation. And yet you say you are a scribe like me.

**Girnishag:**

What do you mean I am not a scribe like you? When you write a document it makes no sense. When you write a letter it is illegible. You go to divide up an estate, but are unable to divide up the estate. When you go to survey the field, you can't hold the measuring line. You can't hold a nail in your hand; you have no sense. You don't know how to arbitrate between the contesting parties, you are one of the most incompetent of tablet writers. What are you fit for, can anyone say?

**Enkimansi:**

You are the laziest of scribes, the most careless of men. When you do multiplication it is full of mistakes. In computing areas you confuse length with width. Squares, triangles, circles and sectors: you treat them all without understanding.

**Girnishag:**

Me I was raised on Sumerian. I am the son of a scribe. But you are a bungler, a windbag. When you try to shape a tablet you can't even smooth the clay. When you try to write a line your hand can't manage the tablet. Yet you claim to know a Sumerian like me!

Reprinted from *The Sumerians*, by Samuel Noah Kramer, Copyright 1963, by kind permission of the copyright owner, University of Chicago Press.

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# **LESSON I**

## **READINESS: WHAT IS HISTORY?**

### **A. LESSON OBJECTIVES**

1. To be able to create accurate timelines.
2. To identify the relative importance or insignificance of events and turning points in their own history.
3. To recognize that some events are determinants of others.
4. To recognize that some events in our lives are constants in spite of other conditions.
5. To define vocabulary words.

### **B. BACKGROUND GENERALIZATIONS**

1. Our lives represent a succession of irreversible events.
2. We can categorize our personal lives into periods (infancy, toddler, etc.)
3. Events which rely on memory alone are more difficult to reconstruct.
4. Events in our lives are often determined by People and Place.
5. Some events are more important than others.
6. Some events determine subsequent events in your life because they are historically significant. (Historical “firsts.”)
7. Some parts of our lives continue regardless of the people or place.  
Some parts of our lives change as events, people and places change.

### **C. LESSON ACTIVITIES**

Assign the students to create a pictorial or narrative timeline of their lives. During the first class period, discuss the assignment. They will need to include at least two major (do not define the word major, allow the definition to emerge as they think about the assignment) and at least four minor events. They should identify the major and minor events in some visual manner, i.e. color code. They should include the people and the place involved in each event. Encourage them to look through their old photographs and school

papers or diaries. If time allows, they should interview an older person in their household and create a similar timeline for him or her. They should complete their timelines before the second class. On the second day, students should share timelines in small groups and then discuss them as a whole class.

**D. SAMPLE QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION OF BACKGROUND MATERIALS**

1. How many people had a difficult time with the assignment? Why? Was it difficult to remember? Why was it difficult? Which events were easiest to remember? Did anyone have a scrapbook to refer to? A diary? Old letters?
2. Which events did you decide to label major events? Why? Which events were minor? Why?
3. How did major events affect your life? Did things change? Did your life change after the minor events?
4. Who were the people involved? Would the event have taken place if the cast of characters had been different?
5. Where were you during the major events? Would the events have occurred if you had been at a different place? Why?
6. Have any things stayed the same (continuity) for you during your life? (e.g. People, places, friendships, concerns, opinions, physical needs, social needs)
7. What generalizations can you make about change and continuity in your life? What generalizations can you make about the relationship between people, places and events in time?
8. Optional: If any timelines were done that went back one or two generations, have students examine major past events which might have affected their lives today.

**E. VOCABULARY**

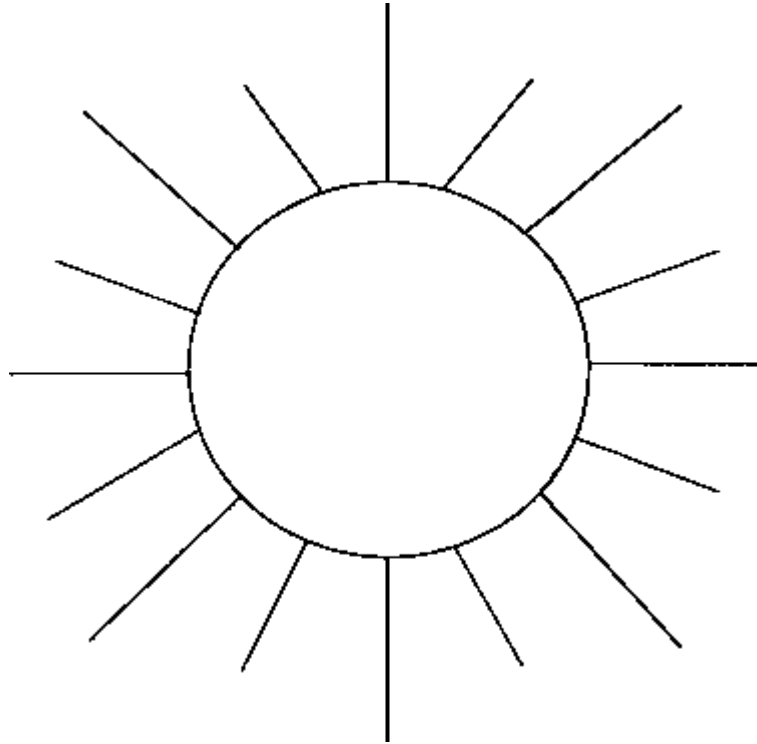
time  
history  
continuity

change  
significant  
events

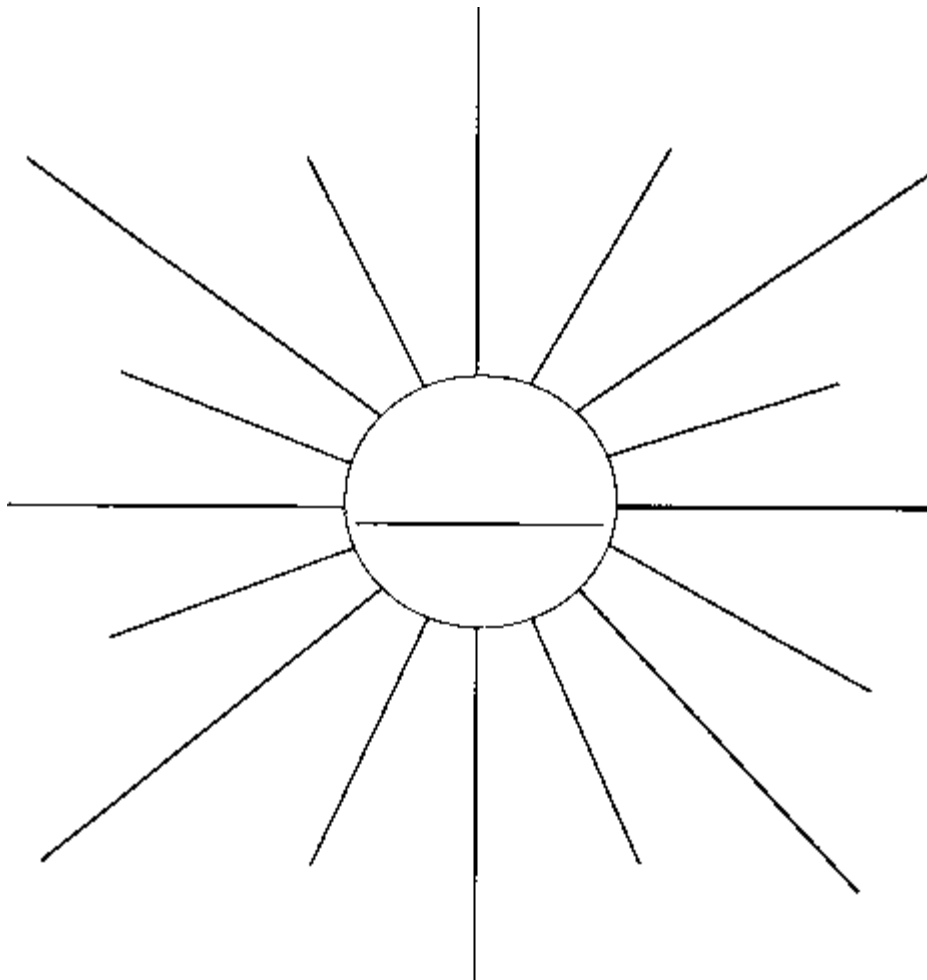
**F. EVALUATING THE LESSON**

1. Check for understanding by having students brainstorm on ideas, feelings, concepts that relate to history.
2. Encourage students to cluster ideas together and write a one to five sentence statement defining history. (**Student Handout 1**)
3. Spin Wheel: Brainstorm about your subject on an associative basis. (**Student Handout 2**)
4. Use **Student Handout 3** to list and classify information from the categories on the Spin Wheel.

## CLUSTER DIAGRAM



**SPIN WHEEL**



**List information from the Spin Wheel (Student Handout 3)**

- 1. \_\_\_\_\_
- 2. \_\_\_\_\_
- 3. \_\_\_\_\_
- 4. \_\_\_\_\_
- 5. \_\_\_\_\_
- 6. \_\_\_\_\_
- 7. \_\_\_\_\_
- 8. \_\_\_\_\_
- 9. \_\_\_\_\_
- 10. \_\_\_\_\_
- 11. \_\_\_\_\_
- 12. \_\_\_\_\_
- 13. \_\_\_\_\_
- 14. \_\_\_\_\_
- 15. \_\_\_\_\_
- 16. \_\_\_\_\_
- 17. \_\_\_\_\_
- 18. \_\_\_\_\_
- 19. \_\_\_\_\_
- 20. \_\_\_\_\_

**Generate major categories. Then classify and subordinate information from the wheel.**

- I. \_\_\_\_\_ *Category I*  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- II. \_\_\_\_\_ *Category II*  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- III. \_\_\_\_\_ *Category III*  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- IV. \_\_\_\_\_ *Category IV*  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_