

Wedges and Words

Cuneiform and the Ancient World

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Grade Level	9th – 12th Grade	**Time Frame**	210 minutes
Subject	Social Studies, Visual Arts	**Duration**	4 class periods
Course	Visual Arts, World Human Geography		

Essential Question

What can ancient writing systems like cuneiform teach us about human communication today?

Summary

Students dive into the world of ancient Mesopotamia by watching a captivating video and adding captions to striking cuneiform images. The adventure continues with a fast-paced scavenger hunt where students become ancient scribes, practicing how to read and transliterate cuneiform symbols. Next, students team up for a jigsaw reading from Google Arts & Culture, uncovering fascinating insights into one of the world's earliest writing systems. Creativity takes center stage as students design their own cuneiform-inspired artifacts—tablets, seals, or scrolls. To wrap it all up, students use a Venn Diagram to compare and contrast cuneiform with modern languages, sparking thoughtful conversations about how writing shapes civilizations.

Snapshot

Engage

Students begin by watching a video and captioning cuneiform related images.

Explore

Students participate in a scavenger hunt and practice transliterating cuneiform.

Explain

Students jigsaw a reading from Google Arts & Culture.

Extend

Students create their own cuneiform project.

Evaluate

Students use a Venn diagram to compare and contrast Cuneiform vs. modern languages.

Standards

Oklahoma Academic Standards (Social Studies: World Human Geography (9th through 12th grade))

II.VA.CHP.1.2 : Analyze, explain, and justify why artists or cultures use specific media (materials) to record their social, cultural, and political history.

Oklahoma Academic Standards (Social Studies: World Human Geography (9th through 12th grade))

WG.3.5: Explain how cultural characteristics, such as language, ethnicity, and religion impact different regions.

Attachments

- Alphabetic Cuneiform Chart—Wedges and Words - Spanish.docx
- Alphabetic Cuneiform Chart—Wedges and Words - Spanish.pdf
- Alphabetic Cuneiform Chart—Wedges and Words.docx
- Alphabetic Cuneiform Chart—Wedges and Words.pdf
- Bad Yelp Review—Wedges and Words - Spanish.docx
- Bad Yelp Review—Wedges and Words - Spanish.pdf
- Bad Yelp Review—Wedges and Words.docx
- Bad Yelp Review—Wedges and Words.pdf
- Caption This—Wedges and Words - Spanish.docx
- Caption This—Wedges and Words - Spanish.pdf
- Caption This—Wedges and Words.docx
- Caption This—Wedges and Words.pdf
- Cuneiform in Context—Wedges and Words - Spanish.docx
- Cuneiform in Context—Wedges and Words - Spanish.pdf
- Cuneiform in Context—Wedges and Words.docx
- Cuneiform in Context—Wedges and Words.pdf
- Graphic Organizer—Wedges and Words - Spanish.docx
- Graphic Organizer—Wedges and Words - Spanish.pdf
- Graphic Organizer—Wedges and Words.docx
- Graphic Organizer—Wedges and Words.pdf
- Lesson Slides—Wedges and Words.pptx
- Mug Template—Wedges and Words - Spanish.docx
- Mug Template—Wedges and Words - Spanish.pdf
- Mug Template—Wedges and Words.docx
- Mug Template—Wedges and Words.pdf
- Riddles Answer Key—Wedges and Words .docx
- Riddles Answer Key—Wedges and Words .pdf
- Riddles Slips—Wedges and Words - Spanish.docx
- Riddles Slips—Wedges and Words - Spanish.pdf
- Riddles Slips—Wedges and Words.docx
- Riddles Slips—Wedges and Words.pdf
- Scavenger Hunt—Wedges and Words - Spanish.docx
- Scavenger Hunt—Wedges and Words - Spanish.pdf
- Scavenger Hunt—Wedges and Words.docx
- Scavenger Hunt—Wedges and Words.pdf

Materials

- Lesson Slides (attached)
- Caption This handout (attached; one per group)
- Cuneiform in Context handout (attached; one per student)

- Graphic Organizer handout (attached; one per student)
- Bad Yelp Review handout (attached; class set)
- Alphabetic Cuneiform Chart handout (attached; one per student)
- Scavenger Hunt handout (attached; one per group)
- Riddles Answer Key handout (attached; teacher copy)
- Riddles Slips handout (attached; see Preparation Note)
- Mug Template handout (attached; one per student)
- Clipboards (optional)
- Clay (for the scavenger hunt, can be anything: play doh, salt dough, air dry clay, etc.)
- Popsicle sticks
- Brown construction paper (optional)
- Black markers (optional)
- Terra Cotta clay
- Clear glaze
- Pen/pencil

10 minutes

Preparation

Explore

For the Scavenger Hunt activity, you will need to print 1-2 copies of the **Riddles Slips** handout. While the narrative focuses on having students solve only Riddle 1, see our "Teacher's Note: Scaffolding the Activity" for guidance on adding Riddle 2. We suggest printing 2 copies of the Riddle Slips based on class size (i.e. if you have a larger class, it may be easier to have more slips for students to work with so that groups aren't fighting over the same slip). Print and cut however many slips you need. Then, hide the slips around your room for students to find. The slips are labeled "Riddle 1.1" meaning "Riddle 1" and "word 1" etc.

Extend

Review the narrative and "Teacher's Note: Cuneiform Project Modifications" to decide which project you will have students do. Read through all the steps carefully and have the relevant materials ready.

15 minutes

Engage

Use the attached **Lesson Slides** to guide the lesson. Display **slide 2** to show the title. Then start by posing the essential question and explaining the lesson objectives using **slides 3–4**.

Move to **slide 5** and play the “Cuneiform” video for students.

Embedded video
https://youtube.com/watch?v=MZwaGU6dOH8

After they have viewed the video, have students get into small groups and pass out one copy of the **Caption This** handout to each group. Move to **slide 6** and explain the Caption This instructional strategy to students. Instruct students to use what they learned from the video and what they see in the images to create with their group a 1-3 sentence caption describing what the image represents. Move through **slides 7-10** to show the images bigger. Pause between slides to give students enough time to observe the images. Have a few students share some of their captions before moving on.

35 minutes

Explore

Transition to **slide 11** to review important vocabulary. Emphasize to students that Cuneiform is a writing system, not a language. They will not be *translating* with this activity, but *transliterating*.

Display **slide 12** and pass out an **Alphabetic Cuneiform Chart** handout to each student. Introduce the chart and explain the differences/adjustments between the two writing systems (for example, there is no 'E' so you use 'I" instead). Inform students that they will use this chart for a scavenger hunt.

Have students form small groups. Move to **slide 13** and pass out the **Scavenger Hunt** handout, one per group. Using the slide, introduce students to the Scavenger Hunt activity. Explain that students will be solving a riddle from the **Riddles Slips** handout (see previous note in Preparation section). Each word of the riddle is hidden somewhere in the room and is in cuneiform. Tell students that they will find the word, transliterate it from cuneiform into English, then write it down on their paper in the marked space provided. Once they have found and transliterated all words of the riddle, they will solve it (in English). They will then transliterate it from English into cuneiform. Display **slide 14** and review how to stamp clay (if needed, play the tutorial video on the slide). Explain that after they finish the scavenger hunt, they will stamp their cuneiform word into a slab of clay, using a popsicle stick. The first group to correctly stamp the cuneiform answer into the clay wins! Move to **slide 15** to have the directions for the scavenger hunt displayed as students work. Give students time to work and make sure all materials are ready for them.

Teacher's Note: Scaffolding the Activity

There are two riddles provided in this lesson. Riddle 1 has fewer words. For instance, if you have slower readers or special needs students, consider using the shorter Riddle 1 and save Riddle 2 for more advanced students. Riddle 2 is longer and more complex. You may want to choose the riddle that is best suited for your students or differentiate the groups and use both riddles accordingly as part of the scavenger hunt. Assign the specific riddle number they should search for to avoid confusion.

Teacher's Note: Guiding the Scavenger Hunt

Consider allowing students to work in small teams so that there is no conflict over riddle slips. Use the provided **Riddles Answer Key** as a reference. Consider having students check their answer to the riddle with you before they transliterate it into cuneiform and again before they stamp it into the clay.

30 minutes

Explain

Pass out the **Cuneiform in Context** handout to every student. Display **slide 16** and select the Writing and Books link on the slide to introduce the Google Arts & Culture web resource students will be using during the lesson. Read the initial description and read through the passage of the "Clay Tablet" aloud to the class. Have students complete the first section summary on their handout about the introduction. Go back to slide 16 and have students get into groups of four and allow them to choose which section they want to read from the list provided:

- Hebrew script + Scroll
- Nepalese script + Leporello
- Lettering sketch + Typeface design
- Specimens, catalogs, typeface specimens

Transition to **slide 17** to share the shortened URL link. Direct students to access their electronic devices and log onto the website. Allow students time to read their specific section and create a 2-3 sentence summary for their assigned section. Allow students time to work.

Move to **slide 18** and introduce students to the Jigsaw instructional strategy where they will now teach their section of the Google Arts & Culture resource to the rest of their group.

100 minutes

Extend

Teacher's Note: Cuneiform Project Modifications

If your students are still beginners to art, consider using the first option of having them create a tablet instead of a mug. If you're a Social Studies teacher and don't have access to art supplies, use this paper bag option. When using either of these modifications, adjust the narrative below accordingly.

Clay Tablet Option:

Students will create a tablet out of clay that they will stamp their message into. You can use air-dry clay or clay that needs to go into the kiln. Other materials needed are popsicle sticks for stamping.

Paper Bag Option:

Use brown construction paper or a brown paper bag. Rip the edges so they are rough and uneven to mimic a clay tablet. Then have students use a black marker to write the cuneiform complaint on the paper.

Display **slide 19** and pass out the **Bad Yelp Review** handout to every student. Introduce the article to the students by explaining that when this tablet was translated, historians discovered the author was complaining about a copper delivery to a business owner. It was not as quick or easy to write things down using clay tablets compared to our being able to type something up on our phone, but this person still took the time to do it. This shows us how people are still the same thousands of years later. Have students read (aloud or silently) the actual complaint from the handout.

Move to **slide 20** and explain that students will create their own cuneiform mug, using their own bad Yelp review as the content. Pass out the **Graphic Organizer** and **Mug Template** handouts to every student and instruct them to use this space to brainstorm an item or service they would complain about, draft the response in English, and then again in Cuneiform using their Alphabetic Cuneiform chart.

Explain that students will be creating a mug out of terra cotta. It is similar to the typical white stoneware used in ceramics classes except that when it is fired, it will be orange, similar to many of the original cuneiform tablets. This mug will be created using the slab method: the slab will serve as their "clay tablet." Students will carve their message into the clay using a popsicle stick while the clay is flat on the table; then they will form the slab into a cylinder for their mug.

Teacher's Note: Cuneiform Project

If needed, here are the steps students should take when crafting their mugs:

1. Use the provided template to cut their pieces (there will be the circle base, the long rectangle for the body of the mug, and a smaller rectangle for the handle).
2. Stamp their cuneiform message into the clay.
3. Form the slab into a cylinder, score, and slip the edges together.
4. Then have them score and slip it onto the circle base.
5. When they have completed the scoring, have them blend all the seams together.
6. When the mug has dried to leather hard, have students form the smaller rectangle into a handle, then score and slip it onto the body of the mug.
7. Once the handle is attached, invite them to add any additional 3D elements by scoring and slipping them onto the mug body.
8. After the mug is dry, proceed to bake in the kiln like normal.

Note: Students can add additional 3D designs to their mug, but only the cuneiform may be carved. Everything else has to be added onto the mug after it is formed. Make sure students sign their tablets with their name in cuneiform to ensure easy identification.

Provide all materials for students and allow them time to work.

15 minutes

Evaluate

Display **slide 21**. Have students work with a partner and draw a Venn Diagram that compares cuneiform to modern languages. Encourage students to not only use what they learned from this lesson, but also other classes like their foreign language classes.

Resources

- K20 Center. (n.d.). Caption this. Strategies. https://learn.k20center.ou.edu/strategy/82
- K20 Center. (n.d.). Jigsaw. Strategies. https://learn.k20center.ou.edu/strategy/179
- K20 Center. (n.d.). Venn diagram. Tech Tools. https://learn.k20center.ou.edu/tech-tool/689
- Harmon, J. (2025). Writing in cuneiform. Video. https://www.youtube.com/shorts/HxDPZG_KhH0
- Lubocki, J. M. (n.d.). *Writing and books at the National Museum of Wroclaw*. Google Arts & Culture. https://artsandculture.google.com/story/7QWxHkBam8ko9A
- The Daily Bellringer. (2022, December 4). *Cuneiform*. YouTube. [video] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MZwaGU6dOH8