A History of Writing

one of the earliest examples of writing, a 4th millennium tablet from Uruk, lists sacks of grain and heads of cattle
The earliest writing seems to be an accounting device to record inventory.

Clay tokens were used for this purpose in the Mediterranean as early as 8000 BCE and were common by 4000 BCE.
Clay tablets from Sumer, c. 3200 BCE, show early pictographic writing, which later became wedge-shaped cuneiform...
Cuneiform, literally ‘wedge-shaped’ writing on baked clay tablets, was first used ca. 3000 BCE in Mesopotamia.

Wedges were easier to carve than curved lines.
Writing was invented multiple times in many places on earth . . .

the earliest Chinese writing was “oracle bone” script, inscribed on tortoise shell or ox bone during the Shang Dynasty, ca. 1600 - 1000 BCE.

priests burned the shell or bone, then read the cracks as good or bad omens
This Chinese calligraphic poem is written on silk and dates from the Song dynasty, 900 - 1279 CE. By this time, Chinese writing has clearly become ideographic rather than pictographic.
Chinese characters are sometimes simplified --

traditional characters still used in Taiwan and elsewhere

simplified version, used for Mandarin
Another pictographic writing system developed in meso-America.

The Dresden Codex is one of four surviving pre-Columbian Mayan manuscripts.

The script, recently deciphered, uses symbols that stand for sounds and whole words.
The Nosó or Naxí live in Yunnan province, in China, and use a pictographic writing system as a mnemonic for priests. 19th c.
The Egyptian Book of the Dead --

-- the hieroglyphs, which contain both semantic and phonetic information, read, “the great god, foremost of the west, that he may give a good burial to the god’s father of Amun-Re, king of gods, Pawiaenadja, true of voice.

The arrow points to an apparent “scribo”
The Rosetta Stone was carved around 290 BCE and was discovered in 1799;
it contains 3 scripts: hieroglyphic, demotic Egyptian, and Greek.
Phoenician writing emerges ca. 1200 BCE; all 22 symbols were consonants -- the vowels weren’t written
Archaic Greek writing adapts Phoenician script, c. 750 - 500 BCE

is the Greek alphabet a major development, or a minor improvement on an older form of writing?
The first page of the Beowulf manuscript.

The poem was composed between 680 and 800 CE, and the ms. dates from the 10th or 11th c.

The sole copy was damaged in a fire in the late 18th c.
The futhark is a runic system used in Anglo-Saxon England and parts of Europe, mainly for inscriptions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>F</th>
<th>U</th>
<th>B</th>
<th>F</th>
<th>R</th>
<th>K</th>
<th>G</th>
<th>W</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>fhu</td>
<td>uruz</td>
<td>purisaz</td>
<td>ansuz</td>
<td>râlpô</td>
<td>kaunaz</td>
<td>gebô</td>
<td>wunnô</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fehu</td>
<td>aurochs</td>
<td>giant</td>
<td>god</td>
<td>riding</td>
<td>ulcer</td>
<td>gift</td>
<td>joy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hagalaz</td>
<td>naupiz</td>
<td>isa</td>
<td>jera</td>
<td>eihwaz</td>
<td>perþ</td>
<td>algiz</td>
<td>sôwülô</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hail</td>
<td>need/hardship</td>
<td>ice</td>
<td>year/harvest</td>
<td>yew tree</td>
<td>luck</td>
<td>sedge (?)</td>
<td>sun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>G</td>
<td>D</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>teiwaz</td>
<td>berkana</td>
<td>ehwaz</td>
<td>mannaz</td>
<td>laguz</td>
<td>inguz</td>
<td>dagaz</td>
<td>ôpila</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the god Tyr</td>
<td>birch twig</td>
<td>horse</td>
<td>man</td>
<td>water</td>
<td>the god Ing</td>
<td>day</td>
<td>inherited land</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In the 15th c., King Sejong commissioned a group of scholars to create a Korean alphabet, now called Hangul, to free Korea of the influence of Chinese writing.
The earliest Japanese writing, dating from the 8th c., and perhaps as early as the 6th c., is called manyogana and uses Chinese characters (right column) to represent Japanese phonetic values (left column).

the character segment in red was adapted to form the katakana on the left
Today, Japanese uses four different writing systems:

- **romaji**, Roman letters representing Japanese sounds
- **hiragana**, ordinary syllabic script
- **katakana**, which derives from Chinese characters, and is used for writing non-Chinese loan words;
- and **kanji**, Chinese characters used to represent Japanese words.
Devanagari script was first developed to write Sanskrit in the 12th c. CE, and is now used for Hindi and other South Asian languages.