The first recorded words of history were set down in the cities of Mesopotamia, and they promoted the power of the temples and kings in the expanding city-states. The people who controlled the production and distribution of goods used writing to enhance communication among large numbers of individuals and to keep track of the products of their realm. Oral communication and human memory had adequately served the needs of small-scale hunting and gathering and village farming communities, but they imposed limits on a society’s scale and complexity. As people developed more specialized skills and roles, they had to communicate with other specialists and convey messages over longer distances. Writing facilitated transactions and information sharing across wider spans of distance and time.

We now take reading and writing for granted, but they emerged independently in only a few locations. Mesoamerica was one such area, and China, too, saw the autonomous development of literacy. What is certain is that at approximately the same time, Mesopotamians and Egyptians became the world’s first record keepers and readers. The precursors to writing appeared in Mesopotamian societies when farming peoples and officials (who had been using clay tokens and images carved into stones to seal off storage areas) began to use these tools to convey messages. Originally intended simply to identify those responsible for the vessels and storerooms where valuable commodities were held, these images—when combined with numbers also drawn onto clay tablets—began to record the distribution of goods and services.

In a flash of human genius, someone (probably in the city of Uruk) understood that the marks, usually pictures of objects, could also represent words and then distinct sounds. A representation that transfers meaning from the name of a thing to the sound of that name is called a rebus. For example, a picture of a bee can be used to represent the sound “b.” Such pictures opened the door to writing: a technology of symbols that uses marks to record specific sounds. Before long, scribes connected symbols with sounds, and sounds with meanings. As people combined rebus symbols with other ways to store meaning in visual marks, they became able to record and transmit messages over long distances by using abstract symbols or signs to denote concepts; such signs later came to represent syllables, which could be joined into words.

From the beginning, scribes occupied a special place in Mesopotamian societies. By pressing these signs into wet clay with the cut end of a reed, the scribes engaged in a form of wedge-shaped writing that we call cuneiform; it could be used to fill clay tablets with information. What looked like gibberish to someone who was illiterate was actually intelligible to anyone who could decipher it—even those in faraway locations or in future generations. This Sumerian innovation powerfully enhanced the ability of urban elites to produce and trade goods, to control property, and to transmit the ideas of a society through literature, historical records, and sacred texts. Writing changed the human experience fundamentally because writing stored human communication and memory in the symbols of a natural spoken language.
By taking these gradual steps, Mesopotamians opened the door into the world of literacy. The cuneiform script was exceedingly complicated, using a large set of signs that only a very small proportion of the population was trained to decipher. Therefore, literacy—though a fundamental part of the civilizing process in cities—was a skill mastered by only a tiny but influential elite.

Much of what we know about Mesopotamia rests on our ability to decipher cuneiform script. Writing that used the rebus first appeared around 3,200 BCE, but not until about 700 years later could the script record spoken utterances completely. By around 2,400 BCE, texts began to describe the political makeup of southern Mesopotamia, giving details about its history as well as its economy. At that time, the land of Sumer in the southern floodplain consisted of at least a dozen city-states. Northern cities like Akkad also borrowed the cuneiform script to record economic transactions and political events, but in their own language. Cuneiform’s adaptability to different languages is one of the main reasons its use spread so widely. As city life and literacy expanded, they gave rise to more than documents; they also spawned the first written narratives, the stories of a people and their origin.

One famous set of texts written down around 2,100 BCE, “The Temple Hymns,” describes the 35 major divine sanctuaries in southern Mesopotamia. The magnificent Sumerian King List is among the texts that recount the making of political dynasties and depict great periodic floods. Written around 2,000 BCE, it organizes the reigns of kings by dynasty. The Sumerian King List also refers to a Great Flood, which is just one of the traditional Sumerian stories that were transmitted orally from one generation to another before being recorded. The Great Flood—a crucial event in Sumerian memory and identity—explained the city of Uruk’s demise as the gods’ doing. Flooding was the most riveting of natural forces in the lives of riverine folk, and it helped shape the material and symbolic foundations of Mesopotamian societies—societies whose breakthroughs were a result of utilizing the waters of massive rivers like the Tigris and the Euphrates.

Questions [Write out the questions and compose your answers on a separate sheet of paper.]

1. Why did humans develop literacy (reading and writing) in the ancient world?
2. How did Mesopotamian elites take advantage of literacy?
3. What is cuneiform and what is a rebus and how are they related?
4. How do modern historians benefit from the development of literacy? Make sure your answer includes concrete examples.
5. “Cuneiform’s adaptability to different languages is one of the main reasons its use spread so widely.”—Explain how this quotation relates to the concept of cultural diffusion. [Cultural diffusion is the process by which a cultural item or idea spreads from group to group or society to society.]