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From Pictures to Letters

Vocabulary

Pictogram	Character
Symbol	Abstract
Simplify	Stick Figure

Create your own Pictogram

The symbols, or characters, that make the Chinese language date back to ancient China where language characters began as pictures that communicated ideas. These early forms of communication are called “pictograms”. A pictogram is a representational symbol that stands for an idea. For example, can you think of a common pictogram that means “Ladies’ Restroom” or “Men’s Restroom”? How about a pictogram that means “Children at Play” or “Winding Road”?

It is fun to look at the original Chinese pictograms that gradually, over time, transformed into the characters that we understand as the Chinese language today. Also check out the origin of Chinese writing at www.ancientscripts.com/chinese.html

Here is an example:

	Oracle Bone Script 1500 ~ 1000BC	Lesser Seal Script approx. 1500BC	Modern 220CE ~ Present
sun			
human being			
fish			
horse			

What do you notice about the original pictogram?

What do you notice about its transformation?



The process of the representational pictogram changing, or simplifying over time into the abstract Chinese character is called “abstraction”. When we simplify an image it becomes abstract when we can no longer recognize what it represents just by looking at it.

Now that we understand what a pictogram is and how they changed, or become abstracted over time, lets have fun with the process!

Materials

Paper

Pencil

How to Create Your Own

1. Draw a simple stick-figure drawing of an idea or action.
2. Study your drawing.
3. What can you take away?
4. Can you still tell what it is?
5. If you can, take a little more away, or combine parts of it.
6. Can you still tell what it is?
7. Repeat the above steps until you can no longer tell just by looking what your drawing represents. You might show it to someone that has never seen it, and see if they can tell.
8. When it has lost its immediate visual meaning, you have succeeded in totally abstracting it!
9. Congratulations, you have turned a pictogram into a symbol, or character. Could you create an entire language this way? Give it a try! Have fun!

