

Writing and Education

You are in a granary, where ancient Egyptian government scribes are keeping written records as workers fill sacks with grain.

Scribes fulfilled a variety of functions in ancient Egyptian society. They were Egypt's official record keepers, and they performed various jobs for the government and religious institutions. Scribes helped administer the laws, collect taxes, and supervise government projects. They might work at the pharaoh's palace, or travel along with members of the court to keep an official record of events. Many scribes achieved high rank and honors, and their profession was well respected and often financially well rewarded.

Scribes were recruited from all classes of society. While only men were allowed to become scribes, some women did learn to read and write. Scribes were educated by priests. The most important part of the school curriculum was the reading and writing of *hieroglyphs*. Egyptians used this writing system to record everything from laws and business contracts to songs, jokes, and tales. The hieroglyphic system was so complicated, it took years for students to master it. Many students learned a simpler cursive writing system instead, called *hieratic* script. This system was more practical and was used for such everyday tasks like record keeping.

School life for students was not easy. The school day was very long, sometimes lasting from just after sunrise to sunset. Schoolmasters were strict and often treated their students harshly. Any student who wasn't willing to learn was severely scolded, and even physically beaten. Scribal students spent as much as four years copying the hieroglyphic signs over and over again on their writing tablets. After that, successful students were entrusted with writing on *papyrus*, a kind of scroll made from the parts of a papyrus plant.

Students who successfully completed their training would go to work alongside experienced scribes to learn more about record keeping. Scribes were assigned to travel throughout the cities and villages and keep track of tax records for the pharaoh. They would also keep records of the grain and food supply, in order to help prevent a famine (a severe lack of food). Scribes also kept the census, measured the rise of the Nile River, and traveled with military expeditions.

Discussion Questions: What did scribes do? What kind of training did they receive?