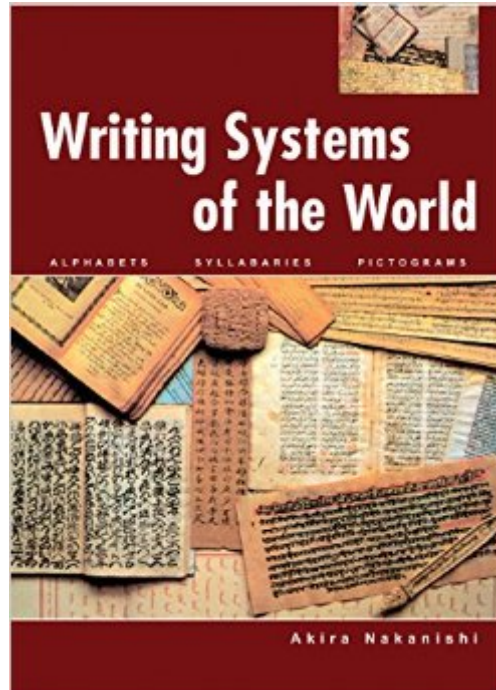


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# Writing Systems Of The World: Alphabets, Syllabaries, Pictograms



## Synopsis

This unique, ambitious and entertaining book presents twenty-nine scripts in detail and offers examples of a hundred more. Written in nontechnical prose and organized into brief but comprehensive sections, it will serve as a handy reference for world travelers, stamp collectors, and calligraphers, along with providing hours of reading enjoyment to those who are fascinated by the written symbol itself. The scripts covered here are from all over the world. A few, like Greek or the Cyrillic script used for Russian, may be familiar to readers of Western languages. But others may seem strange, such as Pakistan's Urdu, which is written in a style so fine that newspapers are not typeset but reproduced from pages laboriously written out by hand. Each of the script sections includes charts of the symbols, reading tips, forms of numerals, and other features that help explain how the language is written. Further enhanced with maps, illustrations, a glossary, and useful appendixes, *Writing Systems of the World* is a remarkably concise and organized look at what is perhaps mankind's greatest achievement, the written language.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

The map inside the front cover is worth the price on its own. I have not seen a similar map anywhere else and believe me, I've looked. The description of the world's writing systems is useful and the metric for inclusion (they have to be used on newspapers stamps or currency) is a clever way of identifying significant writing systems in common use. Some information on encoding of writing systems for computer use would have increased the value of the book for me but would

probably turn off a great number on non-technical potential readers. An update of this book is overdue. Much of the information is from the 1970s and a lot has changed since then. Many of the former soviet republics have changed, or are changing their writing systems from Cyrillic to either Arabic or Latin.

This book serves well as a compact catalog of the major writing systems in the world. It's not the reference I was looking for, however. It's quite brief, and the examples are almost always newspapers. The other issues I have are: 1. It's kind of out of date - the information is all from the eighties. There's been some redrawing of the borders and changes in fonts and conventions since then. 2. The quality of the reproductions is poor. Many of the beautiful scripts in here are not shown in their best light. The plain fonts and photocopy-quality examples just don't do the scripts justice. Still, it does contain reproductions of a lot of alphabets. It would be really handy in identifying an unknown sample of writing, for example.

Have you ever come across a label from an imported food item, or perhaps a local newspaper put out by an immigrant community, and found yourself mystified by a writing system which was utterly alien to you? Whether or not you've had such an experience, Akira Nakanishi's "Writing Systems of the World" will open your eyes to the glorious diversity of its title subject. Nakanishi's excellent reference work organizes the writing systems geographically. Each of the major writing systems is carefully profiled, and the phonetic equivalents (in Roman characters) are given for all syllabic and alphabetic characters. The book dramatically illustrates the major writing systems by reproducing pages from newspapers throughout the world. It is marvelous to see the Armenian alphabet, the Amharic syllabary, and many other writing systems thus used in the context of practical daily communication. In addition to the thorough profiles of nearly 30 major systems, Nakanishi gives shorter examples of dozens more writing systems, ranging from those used with extinct ancient languages to new writing systems invented in modern times. The book also contains appendices which explain the classification system for writing systems (ideographic versus phonetic, phonemic versus syllabic, etc.) and the variations in directions in which scripts are written. A glossary, a bibliography, and an index all add to the book's usefulness. Not only is this book informative, but it is also a visual feast which offers delights and surprises on every page. This is a reference work to be savored.

This delightful, short (116 pages, including glossary) reference book is a good read and a useful,

quick tool to look up what is on that stamp, coin or maker's mark you want to decipher. It is frustratingly out of date. The Japanese original, of which this is the 1980 translation, predates major events like the fall of the Soviet Empire and the birth, rebirth or change in government of many countries and their subdivisions with consequent changes for official languages and scripts. Much scholarly work would require changes in the material. For example, linguistic analysis in the 1980's calls into question whether Thai should be classified as Sino-Tibetan. The recent Yale discoveries of early Semitic graffiti and much archaeological work in Central Asia, the Near East and elsewhere needs incorporation in a revised volume. Some detail known at the time of publication was omitted that would be of interest, like the alphabetic core of the Egyptian hieroglyphic system. The lack of mention of "Cretan" [it was found in profusion at Mycenae on the Greek mainland, also] Linear B being a syllabary used to write early Greek is another puzzling omission. So is the relationship of Etruscan writing to the Germanic runic alphabets not to mention the Roman alphabet. The statement on page 106 that there was no contact between the Americas and the "Old World" before the 15th century was known to be inaccurate at the time of publication and much more evidence of contact has been discovered since. In short, this is an enjoyable book with a delightful presentation. As should be clear, I want to see a new edition with a few corrections, some short elaborations and modernization of the material.

I liked this book, though finding it incomplete. It provides samples of the scripts used for most of the important languages of the world, but not all. There are some errors (a newspaper illustrated to show the Hebrew alphabet used for writing Yiddish is described as being published in the wrong place, as I, who can read Yiddish, could easily determine) but it is more accurate than a lot of other books on the subject. The book is slim, and talks of writing systems more than languages. Thus "Russian script" really means Cyrillic and includes all the languages that use Cyrillic script. It is not a book to learn a language from, but rather a reference on alphabets, and for that purpose, I think a good but not great one. The author does appear to be somewhat obsessed with newspapers. If a script is used for writing newspapers, it is important to the author; otherwise not. And for every script, the author gives an approximate count of the newspapers published using that writing system. But this is hardly a serious flaw. This is not a perfect book on the subject, but it is one I liked. So I certainly recommend it.

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