

History of Printing

For four thousand years after the invention of [writing](#) in Iraq, all writing was done by hand, a character at a time. When people needed a copy of a book, they had to pay a scribe to copy it out for them by hand. Of course this made books very expensive, and only the richest people could have them.



Wong Jei's block-printed scroll, 868 AD

Then a faster method was invented: printing. Somebody in [Tang Dynasty China](#), about 650 [AD](#), had the idea of carving wooden blocks with a page of text, then inking it and pressing paper on the block to print a page. The oldest printed scroll we know of - some [Buddhist](#) sayings - comes from north-west China, and it was printed about 700 AD.

The scroll shown here, which was printed in 868 AD, is also a [Buddhist](#) holy text, like the Bible is for [Christians](#). People in China who were Buddhists believed that copying out these texts would bring you merit, like good luck. This scroll was printed by a man called Wong Jei, for his [parents](#).



Chinese moveable type

This scroll was block printed - the whole page carved together - but by the 1000's AD an alchemist named Pi Sheng in China had invented the more flexible system of moveable type - carving each [Chinese character](#)

separately on small fired [clay](#) blocks and arranging them to make words, so that the same blocks could be re-used to make many different texts.



Gutenberg Bible

About five hundred years later, people all across Europe and Asia began to use moveable type made out of metal, which worked better than the old clay type. In [Europe](#), in the 1400's AD, Gutenberg used moveable metal type made from a mixture of [lead](#), [tin](#), and antimony to print a [Christian Bible](#). Probably printers in Europe had seen Chinese block printing through trade across West Asia, but they seem to have come up with the idea of moveable type on their own. They had, however, learned about [rag paper](#) from China (through the [Islamic Empire](#)) - you couldn't print onto [parchment](#) or [papyrus](#), so they couldn't invent printing until they learned about paper.

From History of Printing for Kids website