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The Story of Papyrus

How a reed from the banks of the Nile became the page that carried writing across the ancient world.

A short illustrated guide

4 pages

CHAPTER ONE

A reed by the river

Papyrus is a tall water plant, *Cyperus papyrus*, that once grew in great thickets along the Nile. Its triangular stems can rise several metres above the water, crowned by a soft burst of thin green rays.

The ancient Egyptians found a use for almost every part of it. The stems became boats, mats, baskets, sandals and rope. But its most lasting gift was a smooth, light writing surface, made by pressing thin strips of the stem together.

Papyrus sheets were in use in Egypt by around 3000 BC. Glued end to end and rolled up, they formed scrolls that could hold long texts: letters, accounts, poems, prayers and laws.

For thousands of years the scroll was the book of the Mediterranean world. Greek and Roman writers read and wrote on papyrus, and great libraries kept their collections on shelves full of rolls.

> *Our word "paper" comes from papyrus, even though paper itself is made in a very different way.*

Papyrus lasts well in a dry climate. That is why so many fragments have survived in the sands of Egypt, while in damper places most of them crumbled long ago.

Over time, parchment made from animal skin and, much later, paper made from plant fibre took its place. Yet the image of the rolled scroll has never left us.

CHAPTER TWO

From stem to sheet

Making a sheet of papyrus needs no glue and no chemistry: only patience, pressure and the plant's own sap. These are the classic steps.

1

Cut

The green outer skin of the stem is peeled away and the white pith is cut into long, thin strips.

2

Soak

The strips are soaked in water so they become soft and flexible.

3

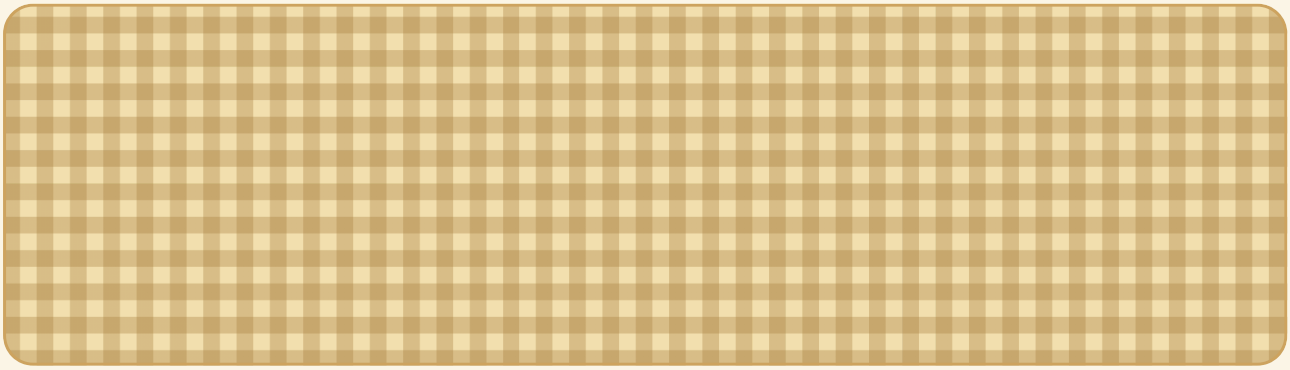
Lay out

One layer of strips is laid side by side. A second layer is placed across it at a right angle.

4

Press and dry

The layers are pressed and left to dry. The sap binds them into one sheet, which is then polished smooth.



Two layers at right angles: the pattern you can still see on an old sheet held against the light.

CHAPTER THREE

Writing surfaces through time

Material	Made from	Typical form
Clay tablet	Wet clay, marked with a stylus	Small tablet
Papyrus	Pith of the papyrus plant	Scroll
Parchment	Prepared animal skin	Scroll and bound book
Paper	Pulped plant fibre	Bound book
PDF	Bits and bytes	A file you can read anywhere

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