

Ancient Greek language and literature

Language linked the ancient Greeks together

Communities of Greeks lived all around the Mediterranean region from Spain in the west to Syria in the east, and from Russia in the north to Egypt in the south. Naturally, there were many differences between ways of life in different parts of the Greek world, but all ancient Greeks were linked by their religion, language and literature.

Different groups of Greeks spoke the language in different ways, called dialects, but they could all understand each other. They referred to people who spoke other languages as *barbaroi* ('barbarians'), because their languages sounded to the Greeks as if they were just saying 'ba-ba-ba'.

Greek literature

The earliest examples of Greek literature were two long poems by a poet called Homer: the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. These two poems told stories connected with the legend of the Trojan War. They were known across the whole of the Greek world.

Many of the most famous writings from ancient Greece were written by Athenian authors in the 400s and 300s BC. These include poetry and plays, speeches, history and works by thinkers called philosophers. Some philosophers were mathematicians and scientists who tried to describe and understand nature. Others tried to work out the best way to lead your life and to organise society. Later, many important writers and thinkers worked in the city of Alexandria in Egypt which had the greatest library in the Greek world.

Greek today

Over time, most of the writings of the ancient Greeks were lost or destroyed. Some important works by the Greeks survived because Muslim scholars valued them and translated them into Arabic. Later, scholars in west and north Europe recognised that the Greeks' writings were still useful and began to re-use and adapt their ideas.

Scholars often borrowed ancient Greek words to explain their ideas and to name new ideas and inventions. For this reason, many ideas and words in science, technology and education come from Greek. You can see some examples below and there are many, many more.

Greek word	Greek meaning	English words
μικρος (mikros)	small	microscope
γραφω (grapho)	I write or draw	graph, geography
φοβος (phobos)	fear	any phobia, for example, arachnophobia
λογος (logos)	thought, reasoning	any -ology, for example, psychology
πολις (polis)	city	words to do with politics

Modern Greek comes directly from ancient Greek, but has many differences. It is spoken by about 13 million people around the world including in Britain.