

ANTHROPOLOGY OVERVIEW

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PART I. A BRIEF HISTORY OF HUMANS AND COMMUNICATION

6 MILLION TO 1 MILLION YEARS AGO (MYA)

“Hominin” is a term used in paleoanthropology (paleo = study of fossils, and anthropology = study of humans) referring to any bipedal species more closely related to humans than to chimpanzees. The transition from great apes to hominins is considered a response to environmental changes in Africa; as forests shrank and grasslands expanded, early hominins had to adapt.

It could also be instead of reacting to environmental changes, humans evolved our abilities simply for better survival. Regardless, the ability to walk upright (as opposed to using arms similar to legs) offered key advantages: bipedalism made long-distance travel much more possible and easier (so hunting and traveling for food would have become much easier); it freed up hands to carry material and make tools; it gave us better vision of our surroundings; and it reduced the amount of exposure to direct sunlight, making it cooler for our bodies. In sum, hominins are distinguished from great apes by bipedalism, larger brains, and finger dexterity for tool creation and use.

Did larger brains come about because of bipedalism and the benefits it offered? Or did we grow smarter, then developed bipedalism, finger dexterity, better thinking? What came first, the chicken or the egg? It's hard to say, but realistically, larger brains probably co-developed with our body evolution.

Note the distinction between a hominin and a hominid. In modern classification, hominid is a broader term that refers to the family Hominidae, which includes all great apes (humans, chimpanzees, gorillas, and orangutans) and their ancestors. Hominin is specific to humans. So, all hominins are hominids, but not all hominids are hominins. These words are not italicized because they are common terms referring to *groups* of species, not a specific genus or species. The word “species” is both singular and plural. Its spelling remains exactly the same whether you are talking about one type of organism or many.

Order of Classification: Dear King Phillip Came Over For Good Soup

Domain	Eukaryota
Kingdom	Animalia
Phylum	Chordata
Class	Mamalia
Order	Primates
Family	Hominidae
Genus	<i>Homo</i>
Species	<i>sapiens</i>

Genus and species are always italicized. The others are not.

6 MYA

Sahelanthropus. Considered by many to be the earliest known hominin, this species lived around 7 to 6 million years ago. It was discovered in Chad, and its defining characteristic was a combination of ape-like features (small brain) and human-like traits, most notably a small, less-honing canine tooth and a foramen magnum (the hole at the base of the skull where the spinal cord exits) positioned more centrally than in apes, which suggests early bipedalism. This finding was significant because it challenged the idea that bipedalism evolved in open grasslands, as its environment was forested at this time.

4.4 MYA

Ardipithecus ramidus. Living about 4.4 million years ago in Ethiopia, *A. ramidus* (“Ardi”) further complicated the narrative. It had a grasping big toe and a pelvis adapted for both tree climbing and walking upright. This mix of traits shows that bipedalism was still evolving and was not yet fully efficient. Its smaller canine teeth also suggest reduced male-male aggression compared to chimpanzees.

4 – 2 MYA

Australopithecus afarensis. *Australopithecus* is considered an ape-like creature, not a *Homo*, meaning it is more closely related to apes than modern humans, although it is seen as a transitional species between apes and the genus *Homo*. Considered a “missing link” between apes and humans. This genus, which includes the famous “Lucy” (*Australopithecus afarensis*), lived from around 4 to 2 million years ago. They were the first hominins to be habitual bipeds, meaning they walked on two legs as their primary mode of locomotion. However, they retained some ape-like features, such as small brains and long arms. Their ability to walk upright was a major evolutionary leap that freed up their hands for other tasks.

STONE AGE

2.5 million to 3,000 BCE

2.3 – 1.4 MYA

Homo habilis (“Handy Man”). Beginning of the ‘Stone Age’, see below. They co-existed with *H. ergaster* and *H. erectus* at the end of their time span. *H. Habilis* descended from *Australopithecus*. *H. Habilis* is the first ancestor of the genus *Homo*, marking a crucial transition. What set them apart from earlier hominins was larger brain size; tool-making abilities; and better bipedalism than previous species.

1.9 – 1.4 MYA

Homo ergaster (“Working Man”). Primarily in Africa. This species was the first to have a body plan more like modern humans. They were tall and slender with long legs, a build well-suited for walking and running long distances in the hot African savanna. They also had a barrel-shaped ribcage and a more human-like nose, which may have been adaptations for cooling the body. They were likely among the first hominins to exhibit true hunter-gatherer behavior.

1.9 MYA – 200,000 YEARS AGO

Homo erectus (“Upright Man”). The longest-surviving human relative, they originated in Africa but were the first to migrate out of the continent and into Asia. *H. erectus* was a master of endurance. They had a larger brain than earlier hominins, though still smaller than ours. They developed more advanced Acheulean tools, including the distinctive hand axe. A key characteristic was their ability to control fire, which provided warmth, protection from predators, and a way to cook food, making it easier to digest and providing more energy.

700,000 TO 200,000 YEARS AGO

Homo heidelbergensis. Found across Africa, Europe, and parts of Asia. They are considered a likely common ancestor of both Neanderthals and modern humans. This species showed an increase in brain size, nearing the modern human range. They were tall and robust, with large brow ridges, but their skulls lacked the unique specializations of later hominins. There is evidence that they were capable of complex cooperative hunting of large animals and may have been the first to intentionally bury their dead.

400,000 TO 40,000 YEARS AGO

Homo neanderthalensis (“Caveman”). Evolved in Europe and Asia, adapting to cold, harsh glacial environments. Neanderthals had a stocky, muscular build and a large nose, both adaptations for surviving in cold climates. Their brains were as large as or even larger than those of modern humans. They were sophisticated toolmakers, used fire, and buried their dead with rituals, suggesting a capacity for symbolic thought and compassion. Genetic evidence also shows they interbred with modern humans.

300,000 TO PRESENT

Homo sapiens (“Wise Man”) emerge. Evolved in Africa and then spread globally. Our species is defined by a lighter skeleton, a high-vaulted skull, a flat, near-vertical forehead, and a very large brain. We are characterized by a capacity for complex abstract thought, advanced toolmaking (we have evolved finger dexterity, allowing us to create hunting weaponry, clothing, etc.), the creation of art, and the use of complex, symbolic language. These cognitive leaps allowed us to adapt to almost any environment and create complex societies, ultimately leading to agriculture and civilization.

200,000 TO 150,000 YEARS AGO

The first evidence of oral language. Because spoken language does not leave a fossil record, the exact times and places of origin are unknown and subject to much debate. However, most scientists believe that oral language developed gradually among early hominids in Africa and was likely in full use by the time modern humans (*Homo sapiens*) began to migrate out of the continent, approximately 100,000 years ago. Oral language is considered a defining characteristic of our species. The general scientific consensus is that the capacity for complex language was present in early *Homo sapiens*. Evidence for this comes from archaeological findings of symbolic behavior, such as burial rituals, cave paintings, and complex tools, all of which suggest a level of cognitive function that would have required language. Some theories suggest a much earlier origin, possibly with earlier hominids like *Homo erectus*, who had larger brains and more complex social structures. We developed language for various functions: cooperation such as coordi-

nating large-scale activities such as hunting, defense, and tool-making; social bonds for sharing complex ideas, creating social rules, and passing down cultural knowledge, tradition, and myths; and for developing new tools and technologies, stimulating human thinking and allowing more rapid learning and innovation.

100,000 TO 50,000 YEARS AGO

Homo sapiens, the ancestors to all modern humans today, began migrating out from Eastern Africa to other parts of Africa and to other continents around 100,000 years ago.

Also during this time period, we see the creation of oral story-telling (chants, myths, and stories) and cave art. African rock art is perhaps the oldest art in the world, dating to at least 77,000 years ago.

Cave paintings are not considered a form of written language. While they are a form of communication and a sign of symbolic thought, they do not represent spoken language. They are typically illustrative and narrative rather than a system of characters or symbols used to record and transmit a specific language. The earliest cave paintings with symbolic meaning date back over 64,000 years, predating any known writing systems by tens of thousands of years.

10,000 YEARS AGO

Humans began to domesticate plants and animals. The Neolithic Age, also known as the New Stone Age, was the final period of the Stone Age, beginning around 10,000 BCE. Its defining characteristic was the Neolithic Revolution, the widespread shift from a nomadic hunter-gatherer lifestyle to a settled, agricultural one. This change was monumental because it led to the domestication of plants and animals, the creation of permanent settlements, and the development of new technologies like pottery and polished stone tools.

5,000 TO 3,000 YEARS AGO

Civilizations develop independently, marked by urban settlements along major rivers and seas. African societies, Egyptian, Mesopotamian, Greek, Roman, Asia Steppes, Indian, Chinese, Mesoamerica, etc.

The first major migration out of Africa took place between 70,000 and 50,000 years ago. Modern humans spread along the southern coast of Asia, eventually reaching Southeast Asia.

Australia was settled early by sea, likely by 50,000 years ago. This required significant ocean crossings, as Australia was never connected to Asia by a land bridge.

Homo sapiens arrived in Europe later than in Asia, with the earliest evidence dating to around 45,000 to 40,000 years ago.

They coexisted with, and eventually replaced, the resident Neanderthal populations.

The Americas were the last continents to be inhabited by humans. The first people crossed the Bering Land Bridge (Beringia) from Asia into North America between 20,000 and 15,000 years ago. From there, they rapidly spread south, with evidence of human presence in South America by at least 14,000 years ago.

3,500 YEARS AGO

First evidence of written language:

- Sumerian cuneiform
- Egyptian hieroglyphs
- Indus script (India)
- Chinese writing
- Mesoamerica writing (Mayans, Incas, etc.)

3,400 BCE

Sumerian/Mesopotamian cuneiform. Cuneiform is a type of writing made by pressing reeds into wet clay. It started as a system of pictographs, which are simple drawings representing objects. However, as the system evolved, it became more abstract and included elements representing sounds and syllables. Cuneiform was used to write hymns, laments, instructions, and accounting.

3,400 BCE

Egyptian hieroglyphs. The word “hieroglyph” comes from the Greek words *hierós*, meaning sacred, and *glýphein* meaning “to carve.” Thus, “sacred carving.” They were made by a reed pen dipped in ink, and were drawn on papyrus or stone. These symbols represented sounds, ideas, or objects. The Egyptians wrote from right to left, and top to bottom. They used signs to represent words and sounds. Phonetic signs represented individual sounds, while logographic signs represented entire words or concepts. The Egyptians also developed a simplified form of hieroglyphs called hieratic script, which was used for everyday writing. Hieratic script was more cursive and less formal than hieroglyphs.

BRONZE AGE

3,000 BCE to 1,200 BCE

2,000 BCE

Oracle bone script (ancient form of Chinese characters)

1,800 BCE

The Epic of Gilgamesh. An epic poem from ancient Mesopotamia (modern-day Iraq), it was written in cuneiform. It tells the story of Gilgamesh, a powerful king of Uruk, and his quest for immortality after the death of his friend Enkidu. Gilgamesh’s journey takes him on a series of adventures, including the slaying of the monstrous Humbaba and a perilous voyage to the ends of the earth to seek the secret of eternal life.

Gilgamesh ultimately comes to understand the limitations of human existence and the importance of cherishing the present moment.

IRON AGE

1,200 BCE to 500 CE

1,000 BCE. Old Testament

8TH OR 7TH CENTURY BCE (700S AND 600S BCE)

The *Odyssey* was an oral, epic, poetic legend first performed by Homer (or a tradition of poets under that name) around the 8th century BCE (c. 750–725 BCE). Because it was part of an oral tradition, it was not officially written down until roughly 725 to 675 BCE, when the Greek alphabet was adopted and adapted for literature. The poem concerns the legendary, unconfirmed conflict of the Trojan War, which, if it has a basis in historical fact, is estimated to have taken place in the 12th century BCE (around 1250–1180 BCE). This timeline confirms that the story was preserved through song and memory for nearly 500 years before it ever touched a scroll. That’s like today, in 2026, writing about a possible war that occurred in the 1500s. Some scholars argue that “Homer” may have been a title for a lineage of poets, or that the works are the result of multiple authors.

PART TWO. ARCHAEOLOGICAL AGES

These “ages” categorize human prehistory based on the dominant material used for tools and weapons. The approximate dates vary by region, but the sequence remains the same.

STONE AGE, ROUGHLY 3.3 MILLION YEARS AGO TO 3,000 BCE

The vast majority of human history, it is defined by the use of stone tools. It is further divided into:

Paleolithic period (3.3. mya – 10,000 BCE) Also known as the “Old Stone Age,” this is when early humans like *Homo habilis* and *Homo erectus* first appeared and lived as nomadic hunter-gatherers.

Mesolithic period (10,000 BCE – 8,000 BCE) The “Middle Stone Age,” which served as a transitional period as the Ice Age ended and humans began developing more refined tools and more settled camps.

Neolithic period (8,000 BCE – 3,000 BCE). The “New Stone Age,” characterized by the Agricultural Revolution, where humans began farming, domesticating animals, and living in permanent villages.

BRONZE AGE, ROUGHLY 3,000 BCE TO 1,200 BCE

This period is marked by the development of bronze, an alloy of copper and tin, which was stronger and more durable than stone. This led to significant advancements in agriculture, warfare, and the rise of complex civilizations.

IRON AGE, ROUGHLY 1,200 BCE TO 500 BCE

This period is defined by the widespread use of iron and steel for tools and weapons, a harder and more plentiful metal than bronze. It led to further technological and cultural expansion, with societies becoming larger and more complex.

OTHER “AGES”

In modern history, new terms have been coined to describe periods of significant technological or cultural change, such as the Industrial Age (mid-18th century to late 20th century), Space Age (1957 to present), and Information Age (mid-20th to present).

PART THREE. HUMAN COMMUNICATION

Where was writing invented? Jared Diamond explains in his book *Guns, Germs, and Steel* (1997) how writing was invented independently by various cultures such as those in Mesopotamia, Egypt, India, China, and Mesoamerica. Without getting too deep into it, one could argue that speech, including oral and written language, are intrinsic to human nature, so it's no surprise it was 'invented' in different parts of the world at different times in history. Early forms of writing were mostly pictural (ideas and words represented by pictures, icons, or diagrams), then becoming alphabetical and numerical.

Communication is defined as the process of generating meaning by sending and receiving verbal and nonverbal symbols and signs that are influenced by multiple contexts. Human beings have a special capacity to use symbols to communicate about things outside our immediate temporal and spatial reality (Dance & Larson, 1976). For example, we have the capacity to use abstract symbols, like the word education, to discuss a general concept of teaching and learning. We can use the word literally, or symbolically. We have a denotation (dictionary definition) that is rather general, and specific connotations of education can vary from culture to culture.

Humans can also reflect on the past and imagine our future. The ability to think outside our immediate reality is what allows us to create elaborate belief systems, art, philosophy, and theories.

Some scholars speculate that human first words were onomatopoeic. Onomatopoeia is defined as words that sound like that to which they refer—words like boing, drip, gurgle, swoosh, and whack sound actually like the sounds they represent. Think of the word “stuttering,” which has a stuttering sound. That is not an accident. In Lewis Carroll-esque thinking: some words are arbitrarily created, but many are created based on the senses associated with them.

Onomatopoeic words evolved into talking words. Circa 3,500 BCE, humans began inventing written language. Scholarly consensus states that writing developed independently in different regions throughout the world.

Three forms of communication include linear, interactive, and transactional. Linear communication is a one-way process where a sender transmits a message directly to a receiver. There is no concept of feedback in this model. It's a straightforward transmission of information. Think

of it like sending a letter: you write it and send it, but you don't immediately know how the receiver will respond. Examples include advertisements, announcements, and broadcasting.

Interactive communication is a two-way process where participants alternate roles as sender and receiver. Feedback is introduced in this model, making it more dynamic. The receiver responds to the sender's message, and then the sender responds to the feedback, creating a back-and-forth exchange. Examples include a phone conversation, a text message exchange, and question-and-answer.

Transactional communication views communication as a simultaneous process where participants are both senders and receivers at the same time. It emphasizes that meaning is created through the concurrent exchange of verbal and nonverbal messages and is heavily influenced by the context and the communicators' shared experiences. This can be thought of as 'live' communication, such as face-to-face, group discussions, and negotiations. All participants are actively sending and receiving messages at the same time, often nonverbally as well as verbally.

When thinking about communication, it is important to think about how we perceive ourselves, others (audience), and the world around us generally. Factors that influence such people's perception include culture, past experiences, and biases.

Verbal communication is the use of oral and written language. To communicate clearly, concisely, and effectively, there are several strategies: organize your thoughts beforehand, define your purpose, know your audience, and practice. For clarity, use simple and direct language, speak slowly and clearly, utilize tone and pitch to support your message, and pause effectively so the audience has time to understand what you are saying. You want to try getting to the point quickly, eliminate redundancy, and be specific as possible. Minimize the use of "um," "uh," "like," and other filler words (also called vocalized pauses) that can make speech sound less confident and concise. Provide your audience with concrete and relatable examples or comparisons. You want to maintain eye contact and be flexible and willing to adjust your communication style based on the context and the other participants. If making a speech or long message, briefly reiterate the main takeaways at the end to ensure everyone is on the same page. Especially in business writing, if there are action items or further information to be shared, state that you will follow up appropriately at a later time.

Nonverbal communication is conveying messages through body language (kinesics, gestures, posture, and body movements), facial expressions, eye contact, touch (haptics), space (proxemics), physical appearance, tone of voice, pitch, volume, rate of speech, pauses, and sounds like sighs or groans, artifacts (Objects we possess and display can communicate information about our identity, status, and values) and time (Punctuality, the duration of interactions, and the speed at which we respond can convey messages about our respect, priorities, and power dynamics). One should note that there are cultural variations in nonverbal communication, such as hand signals, eye contact, touch, personal space, and vocal cues (meaning of silence, tone, and volume). Nonverbal is a deep subject which you should learn more about.

Interpersonal communication refers to the process of exchanging information, feelings, and meaning between two or more people through verbal and nonverbal messages. It's a dynamic, two-way interaction where individuals influence one another. Participants in interpersonal communication are connected, and their actions affect one another. Some interpersonal communication is intentional and structured, while other times it's spontaneous. Communication conveys not only information (content) but also signals about the relationship between the communicators (relational). Once a message is sent and received, it cannot be taken back, and it has an impact. Communication patterns and meanings often develop uniquely within specific relationships. Listening skills are crucial for building interpersonal relationships.

Small group communication refers to the interaction among three or more people who are working together to achieve a common goal. These individuals influence one another and are aware of their membership in the group. Three or more distinguishes small group communication from dyadic (two-person) communication. While there isn't a strict upper limit, the size should be small enough to allow for meaningful interaction and the ability for each member to influence the others. Typically, groups range from 3 to around 15 people. Beyond that, it often becomes difficult for everyone to participate actively and feel a sense of collective identity. A defining characteristic of a small group is its purpose. Members are usually brought together or come together voluntarily to accomplish a specific task, solve a problem, make a decision, share information, or achieve a shared objective. If there is no purpose, the group likely won't form or stay formed. A common goal provides direction and motivation for the group's interactions.

Groups develop shared rules or expectations for behavior, which can be explicit or implicit (like don't act rudely in class, for example). The degree of attraction and sense of unity among group members can influence the group's effectiveness. Disagreements and differing viewpoints are a natural part of group interaction and can be managed either constructively or destructively.

Public speaking is the process of delivering a prepared message to an audience in a structured and formal manner with the aim of informing, persuading, or entertaining. It may also be informal and impromptu. Effective strategies include preparing one's content, knowing one's audience, having an introduction, body, and conclusion, practicing delivery to ensure a confident and engaging presentation, using vocal variety, having eye contact with the audience, using clear and concise language, avoiding jargon, using visual aids to enhance understanding, and managing nervousness through techniques deep breathing, positive self-talk, and ample rehearsing. Ultimately, you want to focus on connecting well with your audience and this will require two things: clarity, and evoking a sense of authenticity. If your message is not clear, it won't make much of an impact. Further, authenticity is palpable. It requires that you genuinely understand what you are talking about, and that you care about it. It means speaking in a manner that expresses your true self.