

Make Your Own Roman Tabula

What is a tabula?

A *tabula* is a wax tablet used by the Romans as a writing pad (top right). Paper was very expensive, but *tabulae* (the plural of *tabula*) were cheap and easy to make and could be reused again and again.

A *tabula* was made from a piece of wood with a shallow recess that was filled with a thin layer of beeswax, which formed the writing surface. Often, two or three *tabulae* would be bound together to make a booklet.

How was a tabula used?

An instrument called a stylus was used to write on the wax surface. This was made from metal, wood, or bone, and had a sharp end for writing and a flatter end for erasing.

To erase marks on the wax, the blunt end of the stylus was heated in a flame and then used to smooth over the wax. You could also gently heat the wax surface directly and then smooth it with the stylus or by gently tipping the *tabula* from side to side.

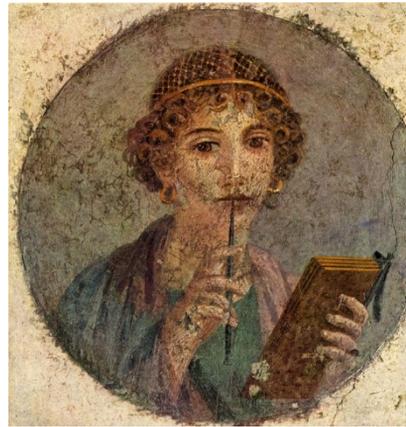
Children would have used *tabulae* in schools to do their work, and they were also used by adult Romans to record events. Some wax tablets have been discovered at Vindolanda Fort on Hadrian's Wall.

Make your own tabula

Fancy having a go at writing like the Romans on your very own *tabula*?

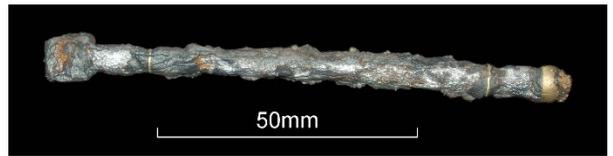
Follow our detailed step-by-step instructions below to craft your own from cardboard and plasticine.

1. Cut out two rectangles of cardboard around the same size as A4 paper (21cm by 30cm).
2. On one piece draw a square inside that's 2–3cm away from the edge. Then carefully cut out the inner square.
3. Glue your two pieces of cardboard together. It will look like a picture frame.
4. Fill the frame with plasticine. You can use yellow to make it look like Roman wax but if you want to use a different colour that's fine.
5. You can now decorate the outside of your *tabula*. Cut out little squares of coloured paper and glue them on to make mosaic patterns.
6. Use a ballpoint pen lid or a pencil as a stylus to write on your *tabula*. Then smooth over the plasticine when you want to start again and write something different.



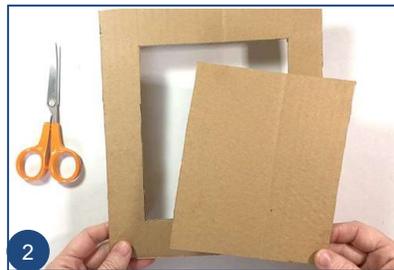
Left: A fresco (wall painting) showing a girl with a stylus and tablet. Pompeii, Italy.

Below: An iron stylus with a square eraser head. The point is broken. Found at Highcross Street, Leicester.



You will need

- Cardboard
- Plasticine
- Scissors
- Glue
- Coloured paper



Instructions and images courtesy of English Heritage <https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/>