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Mountains, trees inspired alphabet

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When you pick up a pen and write you're not simply scratching down a set of abstract marks, but representing the trees, mountains and horizons that surrounded your forebears, according to new research.

The research, which will be published in next month's issue of *The American Naturalist*, looked at more than 100 writing systems throughout history.

It concludes that all letters, and symbols like trademarks, share universal shapes and forms based on patterns found in nature.

"These classes of human visual signs ... possess a similar signature in their configuration ... suggesting that there are underlying principles governing the shapes of human visual signs," the team from the California Institute of Technology writes.

All writing systems contain key shapes like T and X that are based on nature, researchers say *(Image: iStockphoto)*

The researchers say their work provides evidence that we select our visual signs to match the contours of natural scenes.

This is because we have evolved to be good at visually processing these forms, the researchers say, and the shapes we use in writing are chosen for visual recognition at the cost of manual efficiency.

In other words, we use the letters we do because they are easy to read, although they mightn't be the most efficient shapes to write.

This is in contrast to shorthand, where forms are selected for speed and efficiency of writing at the cost of speedy reading.

L, T or X

Dr Mia Stephens from the University of South Australia, a lecturer in linguistics, text, language and society, says the researchers reduced written languages to a set of basic shapes, including T, L and X.

"They've organised and categorised all the different shapes and looked at the frequency and distribution of the shapes and there's a pattern," she says.

"[They say] you can detect similarities of human writing systems and [the shapes are] topographical, so you can stretch them, and squeeze them and muck around with them but they've still got basically the same number of links and junctions," she says.

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The researchers also provide three sets of natural scenes from tribal, rural and urban surroundings to show how these forms are present in our surroundings.

But Stephens says the premise of the article is too simplistic.

She questions the primary evolutionary impulse of looking at scenery and imagines what our forebears would have thought at the time.

"We have to eat, we have to run away from predators, and we've evolved to do those things, not just look at scenery as scenery."

Stephens also says the nature of written language is likely to change in future, leaving the theory obsolete.

"This argument is about the past, and the future of writing is going to be completely different because we've now got keyboards," she says.

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