Pencil Encyclopedia Article

Pencil

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Pencil

A pencil is a thin rod of a solid marking material enclosed in a tube of wood, metal, or plastic, used for writing or drawing. The marking material today is usually composed of a mixture of graphite and clay. Pencil-like marking devices have been used since earliest times. Prehistoric peoples used sticks of charred wood. The ancient Greeks and Romans used pieces of lead. In 1564, the discovery of a large deposit of pure graphite (thought to be a type of lead) in Cumberland, England, made the modern lead pencil possible. Pieces of graphite were wrapped with string and used for writing.

By 1565, the German-Swiss scientist Konrad von Gesner (1516-1565) described the first lead pencil--a piece of graphite enclosed in a wood holder. In 1779 the "lead" used in pencils was proved to be a form of carbon. It was then named graphite, from the Greek *graphein* , meaning "to write." The first pencil-making factory was established in 1761 in Nuremburg, Germany, by Kasper Faber. Faber's brother, John Eberhard Faber (1822-1879) immigrated to the United States in 1848 and built the first American pencil factory in 1861 in New York City.

Joseph Dixon (1799-1869) introduced the rounded pencil and developed the method of gluing grooved halves of cedar cylinders together to form pencils. The French chemist Nicholas Jacques Contè (1755-1805) developed a much-improved pencil in 1795 by mixing powdered graphite and clay with water and baking it; he found he could adjust blackness and hardness by varying the proportions of these substances. Contè's manufacturing method remains the basis of today's pencil industry. Natural graphite was replaced by graphite made from coke after this process was invented by Edward G. Acheson (1856-1931), a former assistant to Thomas Alva Edison, in 1896.

The mechanical pencil, in which the lead is automatically sharpened, appeared as early as 1822; the Eagle Pencil Company patented its design in 1879. Mechanical pencil sharpeners for common pencils were not introduced until the 1890s. The American Hyman Lipman patented the idea of attaching an eraser to the pencil's end in 1858. In the 1990s, the Faber Castell Company in New Jersey introduced the EcoWriter. The barrel of the EcoWriter is made out of recycled newspaper and cardboard.