# The History of Emoji: From Japanese Phones to the World

Name Date Class

## Reading

1 On September 16, 2026, the Unicode Consortium, the group that manages the codes for letters and symbols on computers, approved nine new emoji. They included a cracking face, a pickle, and a lighthouse. With the new skin tone **versions**, the **official** list grew to 3,972 emoji. These small pictures appear in messages all over the world, but their story began with a joke and a few Japanese phones.

2 Before emoji, there were emoticons: faces made from keyboard characters. On September 19, 1982, Scott Fahlman, a computer scientist at Carnegie Mellon University in the United States, suggested :-) as a way to mark jokes on an online message board. Readers turned their heads **sideways** to see the smile. The idea spread to other universities and, later, around the world.

3 The word emoji comes from Japanese: *e* means "picture," and *moji* means "character." It is not **related** to the English word "emotion," although the two words look alike. In 1999, the phone company NTT Docomo **released** 176 small pictures for its i-mode mobile internet service. Shigetaka Kurita, a member of the i-mode team, designed them on a **grid** of only 12 by 12 pixels. The set had weather pictures, a heart, and simple faces. In 2016, the Museum of Modern Art in New York added it to its collection.

4 For many years, people called Kurita's set the first emoji. The real history is more **complicated**. In 2019, the website Emojipedia reported that a J-Phone mobile phone had 90 emoji in 1997. J-Phone later became part of SoftBank. Its set included the famous pile of poo. Kurita himself wrote that year that the J-Phone set came first on phones. Then, in 2024, a games developer named Matt Sephton found emoji-like symbols on a Sharp electronic organizer from 1988. So who invented emoji? The answer **depends** on what you count as an emoji.

5 At first, emoji worked only inside Japan, and each phone company had its own set. In 2007, the Unicode Consortium accepted a **proposal** from Google engineers to add emoji to Unicode, the system that gives every character a number so that different **devices** show the same symbol. Apple engineers joined the work later. In 2010, Unicode added hundreds of emoji. The next year, Apple put an emoji keyboard on iPhones around the world. In 2015, Oxford Dictionaries chose the "face with tears of joy" emoji as its Word of the Year, using data from the keyboard company SwiftKey.

6 A shared number does not mean a shared picture. Each company draws its own emoji, so one character can look different on different phones. In 2016, Hannah Miller and a team at the University of Minnesota asked people in an online **survey** to describe popular emoji. When people looked at exactly the same picture, they disagreed about whether it was positive, **neutral**, or negative in 25 percent of cases. The disagreement grew when the pictures came from different companies.

7 Emoji can even matter in court. In March 2021, a grain buyer in Saskatchewan, Canada, sent a farmer a photo of a **contract** for flax and asked him to **confirm** it. The farmer replied with a thumbs-up emoji. He later said it only showed that he received the contract. The flax crop failed that year, and prices went up. In 2023, a judge decided that the emoji meant yes, and the farm had to pay about 82,000 Canadian dollars. In December 2024, two of three appeal judges agreed. The third judge did not accept that one small picture could count as a **signature**.

## Vocabulary Matching

*Match each word from the reading with its meaning. Write the letter on the line.*

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | **versions** | _____ | **A** | approved by an organization or a person in charge |
| 2 | **official** | _____ | **B** | an agreement that the law can make people follow |
| 3 | **sideways** | _____ | **C** | to say or show that something is agreed or correct |
| 4 | **related** | _____ | **D** | a formal plan that is offered to a group to decide on |
| 5 | **released** | _____ | **E** | is decided by something else |
| 6 | **grid** | _____ | **F** | your name, written in your own special way |
| 7 | **complicated** | _____ | **G** | made a product available to the public |
| 8 | **depends** | _____ | **H** | toward one side, not straight ahead |
| 9 | **proposal** | _____ | **I** | having many parts, so it is hard to understand |
| 10 | **devices** | _____ | **J** | a set of questions that many people answer |
| 11 | **survey** | _____ | **K** | neither positive nor negative |
| 12 | **neutral** | _____ | **L** | connected to something else in some way |
| 13 | **contract** | _____ | **M** | a pattern of lines that form small squares |
| 14 | **confirm** | _____ | **N** | forms of something that are a little different |
| 15 | **signature** | _____ | **O** | machines or tools, such as phones and computers |

## Fill in the Blank

*Choose a word from the box to complete each sentence. Use each word once. The words are already in the correct form.*

| | | | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **complicated** | **confirm** | **depends** | **devices** | **grid** | **neutral** | **official** | **proposal** | **related** | **released** | |
| **sideways** | **signature** | **survey** | **versions** | | | | | | | |

1 There are two _____ of the book: one for children and one for adults.

2 Arabic is an _____ language in more than twenty countries.

3 The truck slid _____ on the wet road.

4 Is this problem _____ to the one we had last week?

5 The studio _____ the film in cinemas last Friday.

6 Draw a _____ of small squares before you start the map.

7 The story was long and _____, so I read it twice.

8 Whether we play outside _____ on the weather.

9 The class voted on a _____ to start at nine instead of eight.

10 Please turn off all electronic _____ before the exam.

11 We did a _____ of 200 shoppers to learn what they wanted.

12 The news reporter kept a _____ face while reading the report.

13 Please call the dentist to _____ your appointment.

14 The letter was not valid because it had no _____ at the bottom.

## Comprehension Questions

*Answer in your notebook or discuss with a partner. Questions 10 to 12 are IELTS-style.*

1 What did the Unicode Consortium approve in September 2026?

2 What did Scott Fahlman suggest in 1982, and why?

3 Where does the word emoji come from? Is it related to the word emotion?

4 What did NTT Docomo release in 1999, and who designed it?

5 Why does the writer say that the history of emoji is more complicated than many people think?

6 Why was Unicode important for the spread of emoji outside Japan?

7 What happened to emoji in 2011 and in 2015?

8 What did the 2016 survey at the University of Minnesota find?

9 What happened in the Canadian court case, and why did the third appeal judge disagree?

**IELTS-Style Questions**

10 **True, False, or Not Given:** *"Emoji were common outside Japan before the year 2000."* Explain your answer using evidence from the reading.

11 **Yes, No, or Not Given:** *"The writer thinks that the question of who invented emoji has one simple answer."* Explain your answer using evidence from the reading.

12 **Author's purpose:** Why does the writer end with the court case in Canada? Is the aim to give legal advice, to show that emoji can have serious effects, or to explain how emoji are designed?

## True or False

*Circle T (true) or F (false) according to the reading. Write a correction for each false statement on the dotted line.*

1 **T / F** The Unicode Consortium approved nine new emoji in September 2026.

2 **T / F** Scott Fahlman first used :-) in a text message on a phone.

3 **T / F** The word emoji comes from the English word emotion.

4 **T / F** Kurita's emoji set is in the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

5 **T / F** Everyone agrees that Kurita's set was the first emoji set.

6 **T / F** The pile of poo was part of the 1997 J-Phone set.

7 **T / F** Before Unicode, each Japanese phone company had its own emoji set.

8 **T / F** Oxford Dictionaries chose the thumbs-up emoji as its Word of the Year.

9 **T / F** In the 2016 survey, people always agreed when they saw the same picture.

10 **T / F** Two of the three appeal judges agreed with the 2023 decision.

## Discussion Questions

*Talk with a partner or in a small group. The questions move from personal to more abstract.*

1 Which emoji do you use most often? Why do you like it?

2 Do you use emoji more with friends, with family, or at work or school? Why?

3 Have you ever sent an emoji that someone did not understand? What happened?

4 Do you still type emoticons made from keyboard characters, such as :-)? When do you choose them instead of emoji?

5 Some people add emoji to almost every message, and others almost never use them. Which kind of person are you?

6 Is it polite to send emoji to a teacher or a manager? Where is the line for you?

7 Kurita made his set on a grid of only 12 by 12 pixels. What can simple designs do better than detailed ones?

8 Which new emoji would you like to see added to the official list? Who would use it, and when?

9 People who speak different languages can all use the same emoji. Can emoji help people communicate across languages, or do they also cause new misunderstandings?

10 Do you think older and younger people use the same emoji in different ways? Give an example if you can.

11 Many people believe the first emoji came from NTT Docomo in 1999. Why do you think a story like this spreads, even when it is not fully correct?

12 Should an emoji ever count as a signature? Explain your view.

13 Oxford Dictionaries chose an emoji as its Word of the Year in 2015. Can a picture be a word? Why or why not?

14 Is writing with pictures a step forward for human communication, or a step back? Explain your view.

### Language Focus: Past Simple with Time Expressions

The past simple describes finished actions and events in the past. Time expressions such as "in 1999," "on September 19, 1982," "that year," and "the next year" tell the reader exactly when each event happened.

**In the reading:**

- "**On September 19, 1982**, Scott Fahlman… **suggested** :-) as a way to mark jokes on an online message board."
- "**In 1999**, the phone company NTT Docomo **released** 176 small pictures for its i-mode mobile internet service."
- "**The next year**, Apple **put** an emoji keyboard on iPhones around the world."

**Practice:** Write three sentences about your own history with phones or messaging. Use the past simple and start each sentence with a different time expression, for example *In 2015*, *When I was ten*, or *Last year*.

**Activities and speed challenge**
englishbridges.com/lessons/history-of-emoji

**Notes**