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From Rocks to Writing: The Pencil Story

Many people write and draw with pencils, but few know about the fascinating history of pencils. In the 16th century, villagers in northern England discovered a shiny, black material underground. This substance, which later became known as graphite, made clear, dark marks on paper. People first thought the substance was a form of lead, a common mistake that still exists today. Lead can be harmful to humans, but graphite is a form of carbon which is harmless to humans.

Early on, people wrapped the graphite in string, which kept their hands from getting dirty. Soon, people began inserting graphite into wooden cases for more convenient use. Mixing graphite with clay allowed pencils to be harder or softer, depending on the user's purpose. Erasers on one end of pencils increased their usefulness. Colored dyes were added to the graphite, making it possible for pencils to produce marks in different colors. By the 19th century, factories used machines to produce pencils faster and more consistently. Pencils became common for use by students, artists, and office workers. Even with the invention of pens and computers, pencils have continued to be widely used. Today, pencils provide a simple, reliable, and flexible way to make marks on paper.