Pictographs

1. A Yukaghir pictograph. Although there is an obvious sense in which, if you already know the message, what is the point of writing, let’s see what we can figure out about what-means-what in the pictograph on the basis of the message:

   The writer is a woman. The recipient of the letter was previously her lover, but now has gone off to live with a Russian woman. The Russian woman, naturally, has broken up the relationship between writer and addressee; nevertheless, the new ménage is stormy. The writer is unhappy alone in her house, and she is still thinking of the addressee. On the other hand the addressee should bear in mind that there is another young man at home sending a tendril toward her. If the addressee want to act on this message, he had better hurry before his new household has children.
A chief of the eagle totem who lives on the bank of a river, four of his warrior-kinsmen, a fifth warrior (of the catfish totem), and another chief, who is more powerful than the first leader, are all agreed in their views. They extend friendship to the president of the United States in the White House. Three of the eagle totem warriors have agreed to abandon their way of life and to settle in houses, thus adopting the white man’s culture. It is hoped the president will understand the offer of friendship and return it.
3. Ojibwa pictograph: the three Christians.

The following “letter” was sent by a young Ojibwa woman to a young man, inviting him to her lodge. The prospective lover is given directions for finding his way and other information appropriate to such an invitation. Only the R.S.V.P. is lacking. (The letters have been added to the original for purposes of identification).

The writer of the letter is a woman of the bear totem ( ). She and two companions, all three of whom are Christians ( ), ( ), and ( ), live in two lodges ( ) near a lake ( ). A trail leads from the lodges to a main road ( ), which runs between two other lakes ( ) not far from the lodges. The letter is being sent to a man of the mud puppy totem ( ), who is reminded of a trail ( ) which leads from his lodge to the main road. A hand extending through the door of one of the dwellings ( ) both invites the young man (the purpose of the letter) and tells him which lodge he should visit.
Chinese next, as it is logographic.

The first major point to be made about the Chinese writing system is that it is logographic — a Chinese character stands not for a consonant, a vowel, or a syllable but for a morpheme. That such a system developed in Chinese follows in part from certain characteristics of the language: 1). morphemes are overwhelmingly exactly one syllable in length and 2). syllables are easily distinguished from one another. Chinese is, in fact, a largely analytic (that is, isolating) language in which what morphology there is is expressed by stringing phonologically-distinct morphemes together.

The fact that modern Chinese is logographic is made abundantly clear by Figure 26. Notice that despite being written with different characters, a large number of morphemes are homophonous. Obviously, the character stands for a meaningful morpheme not just a syllable, a phonological unit.
The katakana above is but one of four writing systems used regularly in Japanese. The oldest is *kanji*, the characters originally borrowed from Chinese, which are logographic in character. Then there the two *kana*, which emerged from the Japanese use of Chinese characters in the eighth and ninth centuries: the *katakana*, which is used for non-Chinese foreign words, and *hiragana*, which is used extensively for morphology. And, the Roman alphabet is also used extensively for commercial products and advertising.
1. The answer to the Yukaghir pictograph:

“The conifer shaped objects in Figure 1 are people. The second from the right is the writer (the row of dots represents plaited hair and thus shows that she is a woman); the next one leftwards, the recipient of the letter, was previously her lover, but now has gone off to live with a Russian woman (plaited hair, together with a skirt with panniers, distinguishing Russian from Yukaghir costume). The Russian woman, naturally, has broken up the relationship between writer and addressee (line from the head of the Russian woman cutting through the lines connecting the two Yukaghir); nevertheless, the new ménage is stormy (criss-cross lines linking the two). The writer is unhappy (crossed lines) alone in her house (the rectangular enclosing structure), and she is still thinking of the addressee (curly tendril reaching towards him). On the other hand the addressee should bear in mind that there is another young man at home (far right) sending a tendril toward her. If the addressee want to act on this message, he had better hurry before his new household has children (two small conifers on the left).”

Don’t tell me it is fuzzy! I know!
O’Grady, pp. 559-560.