

Teacher's Guide: Writings of the Ancient Maya

Recommended Grade Level: 5-8

(also applicable to grades 9-12 for students requiring significant support in learning)

Suggested Time: One class period, plus additional time to complete a writing assignment

Social Studies Objectives	Key Literacy Strategies	Key Vocabulary
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Explore aspects of one of the centers of civilization in Mesoamerica in the first millennium CE through its writings Begin to consider how early European exploration and colonization affected the ancient Maya 	<p>Explain to students that they will be using the following strategies throughout the activity. Note that the part of the activity where each strategy is most useful is listed in parentheses.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Determining Important Information (screen 4) Making Inferences (screen 2, writing assignments 2 and 3) Constructing Summaries (screen 2, writing assignment 1) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> almanac celestial decipher eclipse hieroglyphs reverence scribes

Overview

Writings of the Ancient Maya is a student-directed learning experience. However, while students are expected to work through the activities on their own, teachers should be available to students to keep the activity on track, organize groupings, facilitate discussions, answer questions, and ensure that all learning goals are met.

The following is a summary of the activity screens:

Introduction: Students learn that they will explore what we can discover about the ancient Maya civilization from the writings they left behind.

Screen 1: Students are introduced to the types of Mayan writings that historians have uncovered, and are asked to think about other civilizations and their writing systems.

Screen 2: Students watch a video to learn more about the ancient Maya writing system and the types of things that the Maya recorded in their writings.

Screen 3: Students read about some of the types of things historians have learned from reading the Maya writings.

Screen 4: Students use a Flash Interactive activity to highlight text information that answers questions about the symbols used in the Maya writing system and the types of things that were recorded.

Screen 5: Students print out and reread the essay, or read a more challenging essay, about the ancient Maya writing system. Then they select and complete a writing assignment about the topic.

The following notes include suggestions for how you might enhance the learning experience of students by providing additional context for the content presented and by troubleshooting technology. The notes have been written to correspond with the flow of the activity.

Before the Activity

- ❑ Before students begin, provide an overview of the activity. Suggest a timeline for completing the different parts of the activity, mention the different types of media they will encounter, and identify what they will have to do to demonstrate learning. For example, in addition to the final writing assignment, communicate to students which Notes entries (“Write It Down” sections) you’ll want them to turn in as assignments. You may want to provide an outline of this information on a chart, chalkboard, or whiteboard, or as a hand-out.
- ❑ There are two reading selections offered for this activity. Both readings address the same general content. Version A presents the same text that students will read in the Flash Interactive activity. It is designed to be more accessible to students who have difficulty reading and comprehending grade-level text, and to students in younger grades. Version B is more challenging and appropriate for students who are comfortable reading at grade level. Determine if students should select version A or B of the final reading and writing assignment. You may wish to have all students read the same essay, or assign different essays depending on the range of students’ reading skills. You may also allow students to self-select the essay they would prefer reading.
- ❑ Determine if students will be working individually or in pairs on the activity. Some students may be able to work independently with little or no support. Students who are less familiar with the subject area or who struggle with literacy skills may benefit from working with another student. An effective way to do this is to pair a stronger student with a less able reader. You can also have students work individually on certain tasks and in pairs on others, depending on their experience and needs. If students will be working in pairs on any portion of the activity, let them know if they will be expected to type in their notes individually or as a group.
- ❑ Go through each screen of the activity, including the Flash Interactive activity, so that you can experience what students will be doing.
- ❑ Provide instruction on key vocabulary if you think students will need this preview (vocabulary words are defined in the activity).
- ❑ Arrange computers with Internet access so students can work individually or in pairs.

The Activity

Introduction

This screen introduces students to the ancient Native American civilization known as the Maya. Although their ancient cities are now in ruins, we have learned a lot about this civilization that lived 2,000 years ago. But how?

The Introduction is an important part of this activity. Have students read it so that they will understand what they will be learning. It may also be beneficial to read the Introduction aloud to the class to make sure all students understand the purpose and content of the activity.

1. What Were the Maya Writings?

This screen introduces students to a discovery that historians made as they uncovered the ruins of ancient Mayan cities—pictures and symbols that are a form of written language. Students are then asked to think about two other civilizations and their writing systems, and to write down what these systems use to represent words.

Encourage students to think about their own writing system. (The English alphabet uses 26 symbols—or letters—to phonetically spell words.) Can they think of other writing systems that are similar? Then ask students to think about writing systems that are different, such as those that use picture symbols to represent words or parts of words (for example, Japanese).

2. Deciphering the Maya Code: Watch This!

Students watch a short video about the writings of the ancient Maya and the efforts to translate the code, and then write down what they learned and why they think the information that the Maya recorded was important to them. Encourage students to think about who is recording this information. Is it the common man or woman? Is it the leader or someone representing the leader? What kind of information would this person want preserved?

The majority of vocabulary words for this activity are drawn from this video. You may want to review the terms with students and discuss the meaning before they watch the video.

3. What Else Do the Maya Writings Tell Us?

This screen provides students with additional information about what historians have learned from reading the Maya writings. Encourage student pairs to discuss why they think this information was important for the Maya to record. How does this compare with their ideas from the previous screen?

4. Read About It!

In this interactive activity, students will highlight sections of a reading that help answer the following questions: (1) how did the Maya writing system use symbols to represent words, and (2) what kinds of things were recorded in the writings of the ancient Maya? This focused reading is a prewriting exercise that should help students prepare for their final writing assignment. Remind them to print their activity notes when they have finished.

Answers to question 1 should include that Mayan scribes used phonetic symbols and ideograms to write any word from their spoken language. They should also include an explanation of how symbols were used to represent syllables, rather than individual letters, and that multiple symbols could represent the same sound. Answers to question 2 should include that the writings told the story of kings, key dates, and important events. They should also address how the writings included calendars and celestial almanacs, which the Maya used to plan important rituals and events.

5. Write About It!

Students will now print out their notes and read an essay about the writings of the ancient Maya. Make sure students know whether to select version A or B of the essay. Version A, which is the same as the Flash Interactive activity reading, is for students who could benefit from reviewing the same text. Version B is a more challenging text that expands on the topic. You can choose to have students read the PDF online or print it out and read the hard copy. Let students know whether they will be expected to turn in their notes as part of the assignment.

When students have completed the reading, they should select one of the writing assignments to complete. Their finished paper should be one to two pages in length and reflect students' learning from the activity and the PDF reading. Students can also look for additional information in the provided Web sites or in other online or print resources that you make available to them. Remind them that knowing the author or source of a Web site is important for evaluating the validity of the content. Ask students to list the source information at the end of their paper.

Suggested Follow-Up Activities

Sharing Student Work

It may be motivational, and a further learning opportunity, for your students to post their final essays so that their classmates, peers, and/or parents can see them, as well. This may also provide an opportunity for students to comment on and discuss each other's essays.

If you do not already have access to such an online writing community, Writing Matters provides free classroom publishing tools that allow you and your students to create and publish your own online eZine. More information and a free sign-up are available at the Writing Matters Web site™ (<http://www.writingmatters.org>).

Reflection and Self-Assessment

After students have turned in their writing assignments, you can choose to have them assess their learning. Convene students as a whole class or in small groups to discuss the following questions.

- What did you learn?
- What was surprising?
- What questions do you still have?
- What was the easiest for you to understand and do?
- What was the most difficult?