



## Worksheet 1. Reading: *The Mayans*

**Read the article about the Mayan people. Then review the glossary and complete the exercises that follow it.**

1 A brilliant civilization that was unsurpassed in the Western Hemisphere used to  
2 exist in present-day Mexico and Central America. It was the civilization of the  
3 Mayan people. At its height, from about 300 A.D. to 900 A.D., it flourished.

4 There are several reasons that archeologists and historians have concluded that  
5 this civilization must have been very advanced: the Mayan people had a well-  
6 developed system of hieroglyphics (picture writing) and a system of numbers  
7 that included zero; they could calculate the movements of the moon and the sun,  
8 and they had invented an accurate calendar; they were able to build gigantic  
9 stone buildings that required a knowledge of engineering. In addition, as  
10 artisans, they produced fine carvings and painted murals, and they wove textiles  
11 of cotton and made paper from the bark of trees.

12 The main activities of the Mayans were agriculture, commerce, and warfare. In  
13 agriculture, they developed sophisticated techniques of cultivation. Their principal  
14 crop was maize. They grew several other vegetables, and sisal for heavy cloth  
15 and rope. In commerce, they established an extensive trade network in Mexico  
16 and Central America, and they marketed products like pottery, weapons, jade,  
17 and jewelry. In warfare, the small city-states would frequently fight fiercely  
18 against each other.

19 These small city-states comprised the Mayan lands; the Mayans did not function  
20 as one people. Each city-state had its own ruler. The rulers came from elite  
21 families, and one ruler would inherit the power from another in his family. Every  
22 ruler wanted to extend his power over a larger area.

23 The rulers lived in huge palaces. They also built impressive pyramids as tombs  
24 for themselves, large plazas, and ball courts where they would watch their  
25 subjects play games. All the ceremonial centers were linked by wide paved roads.  
26 From the contents of graves and scenes painted on pottery, archeologists have  
27 learned what the day of an average Mayan might have been like.



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28 The typical Maya family, (about five to seven members), got up before dawn and  
29 had a breakfast of tortillas or tamales, and hot chocolate--or, if they weren't rich  
30 enough, a thick, hot corn drink called *atole*. Other meals would consist of corn,  
31 squash and beans, and sometimes turkey or rabbit. The house was usually a  
32 one-room hut built of poles covered with dried mud.

33 During the growing season, the men would be working in the fields for most of  
34 the day, while the women might be sewing, weaving, or doing other crafts, and  
35 would be preparing food at home. At the end of the day, the family would gather  
36 at their homes, where the head of the household might lead a prayer and chants.

37 At times when they were not working in the fields, the men would be building  
38 pyramids and temples. In exchange for their hard work, the people expected to  
39 attend royal marriages and ceremonies that marked important astrological and  
40 calendar events. At these events, craftsmen and farmers might set up stands to  
41 sell things like pots, cacao, and beads, just like modern-day hot-dog vendors at  
42 football games.

43 Why did this advanced and organized civilization collapse, ending in about the  
44 year 900? There are several theories. Some say that the collapse could have  
45 come from natural disasters, for example, epidemics, earthquakes, or drought.  
46 Some believe that it may have been due to uncontrolled warfare. Others think  
47 that overpopulation might have been the cause—overpopulation combined with  
48 the loss of natural resources. The Mayans themselves could have unknowingly  
49 caused the collapse because they used the land and the water unwisely. They  
50 would plant crops without knowing about soil exhaustion, they would cut down  
51 trees without thinking about preserving the forests, and although they had  
52 irrigation systems, they knew little about the conservation of water.

53 Today, we can see the remains of this civilization at archeological sites such as  
54 Chichen-Itza in Mexico, Copan in Honduras, and Tikal in Guatemala.



### Worksheet 1 (page 3)

#### Glossary

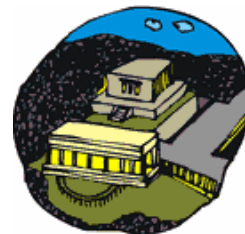
- Line 1 *unsurpassed* — better than all others  
Line 1 *Western Hemisphere* — North, Central, and South America  
Line 4 *archeologists* — scientists who study ancient societies by examining the remnants of their buildings and artifacts  
Line 10 *artisans* — people who do skilled work, making things with their hands  
Line 10 *carvings* — an wood or stone object with cuttings made for decoration  
Line 10 *murals* — paintings on walls  
Line 10 *wove* — past tense of *weave*, to make cloth, carpets or baskets by crossing small pieces of material in a certain way.  
Line 10 *textiles* — cloth  
Line 14 *sisal* — product of a Central American plant from which they make rope  
Line 16 *pottery* — objects made of baked clay  
Line 16 *weapons* — something that you use to fight with or attack someone with, such as a knife, bomb, or gun  
Line 16 *jade* — a hard, green stone  
Line 17 *city-states* — an independent state that consists of a city and the surrounding country area, especially in the past  
Line 26 *graves* — places in the ground where the dead are buried  
Line 29 *tortillas* — pieces of a thin, flat, Mexican bread, made of wheat or flour  
Line 29 *tamales* — small packets of meat wrapped in banana leaves  
Line 38 *temples* — buildings used for religious purposes  
Line 41 *cacao* — the seed from which chocolate and cocoa are made  
Line 45 *epidemics* — a large number of cases of a disease at the same time  
Line 45 *drought* — a long period of dry weather



painting a mural



stone carving



Mayan temple



rope



pottery



## Worksheet 1 (page 4)

### Comprehension practice

**1. Check all the statements that are true, according to the reading.**

- a.  The Mayan people had a very advanced civilization.
- b.  The highest point of its development was about 500 years ago.
- c.  The Mayans had systems for writing and mathematics.
- d.  They had a good calendar.
- e.  They kept to themselves and didn't trade much with other people.
- f.  The Mayan people were very united, like one big nation.
- g.  It was definitely a war that destroyed the Mayans.
- h.  It could have been an epidemic that destroyed the Mayans.

**2. Check all the statements that are true by inference.**

- a.  The Mayans could solve mathematical problems.
- b.  The Mayans had knowledge of astronomy.
- c.  The city-states had democratic governments.
- d.  Women worked in the fields along with the men.
- e.  The Mayans knew a lot about medicine and could control epidemics.
- f.  The Mayans knew how to use their water wisely.
- g.  The Mayans did not successfully preserve their natural resources.