

Book 1:

Writing in Maya Glyphs

Names, Places, & Simple Sentences

A Non-Technical Introduction to

MAYA GLYPHS



by Mark Pitts

in collaboration with Lynn Matson

The Aid and Education Project, Inc.

' El Proyecto de Ayuda y Educación '



This book is dedicated to the Maya people living today in Mesoamerica.

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Title Page Top: The Stingray Paddler (far left) and the Jaguar Paddler (far right) row the Maize God (center) and mythological beasts.

Title Page Bottom: The Canoe sinks, symbolizing the sinking of the Milky Way as the night progresses.



Writing in Maya Glyphs

Names, Places, & Simple Sentences

A Non-Technical Introduction

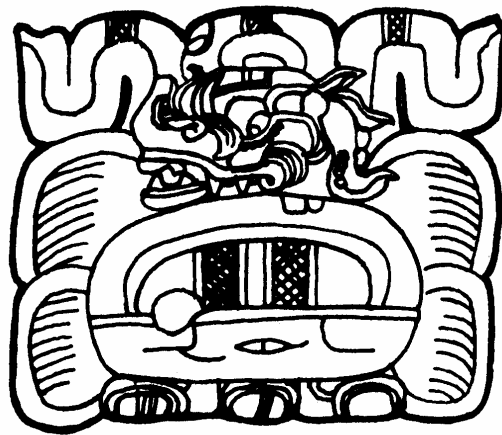


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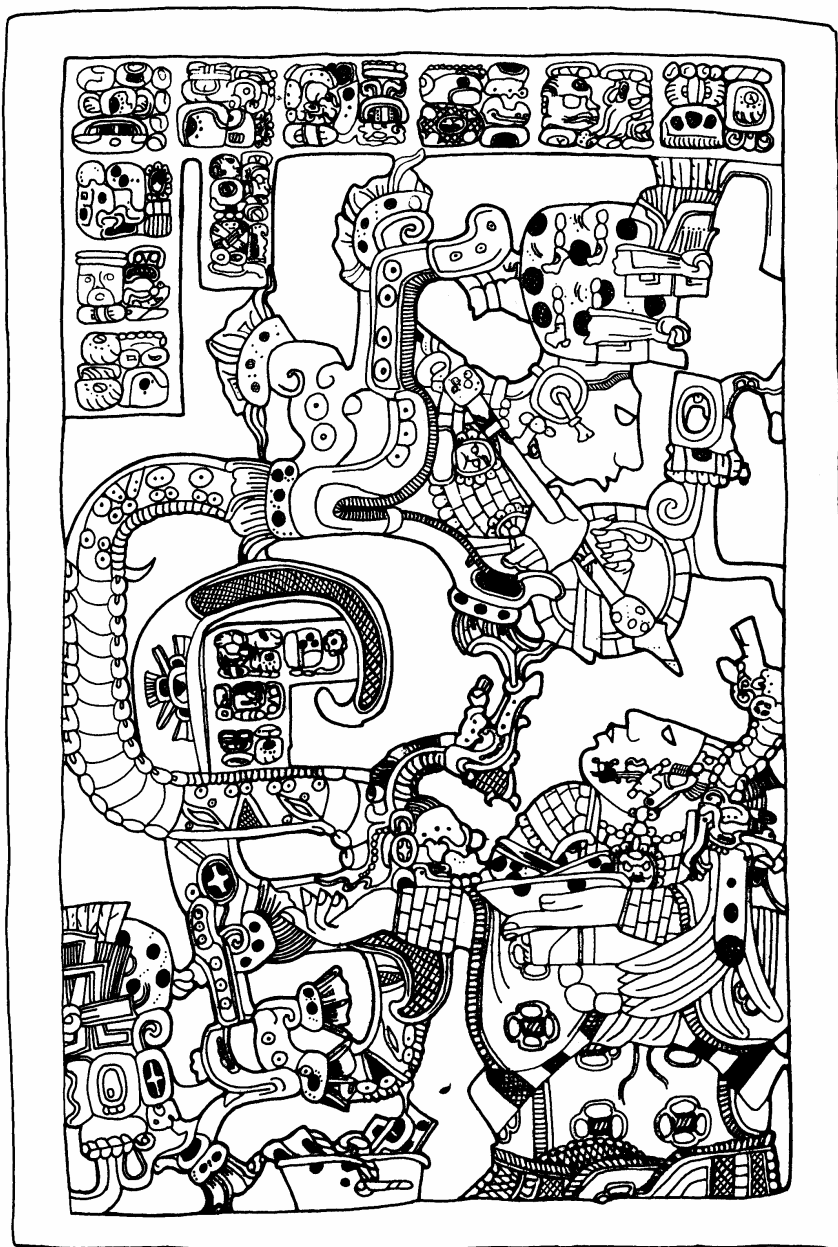
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Chapter 1

Introduction:

The Ancient Maya & Their Writing



Lady Xook has a vision of an ancestor, October, 681

History

You are about to begin to study one of the world's most beautiful forms of writing, the hieroglyph writing of the ancient Maya. At the same time you will learn about one of the world's most remarkable civilizations.

In the history of the world, there have been few people like the ancient Maya. The Maya were great architects, mathematicians, astronomers, and artists. In their time, they built cities as grand and beautiful as any in Europe or the Far East. They were one of only a few people who invented the zero, a concept extremely important in mathematics. According to some calculations, their measurement of the length of the year was more accurate than that of the Europeans when they arrived in the New World. And their artists created a style that is considered one of the great art forms of history, and is today studied by artists throughout the world.

What's more, they were one of only three civilizations that invented a complete system of writing. In this booklet, you will learn about ancient Maya writing and about the ancient Maya civilization.

For many years the ancient Maya were a mystery to the world. Their writing could not be read by anyone, not even modern Maya people. Now, in just the last 25 years, the 'Maya

Code' has been largely broken and it is possible to understand much of what was written on monuments, stelae, tablets, vases, and other objects made by the ancient Maya.

Modern Mayan languages, spoken today in México and Guatemala, share roots with the language of the ancient Maya. And Chorti, the modern Maya language of eastern Guatemala, is the direct descendant of the language of the ancient Maya. In fact, much of what is now known about the ancient Maya language has been gleaned from modern Maya languages, especially *Yucatec*, spoken in the Yucatan peninsula of Mexico, and Chorti (written more correctly as *Ch'orti'*).

Maya glyphs and the ancient Maya language were used in all the cities of the ancient Maya world, including the famous cities of Palenque, Uxmal, Chichen Itza, Quiriquá, Copán and Tikal. While these great cities flourished, Europe languished in the Dark Ages.





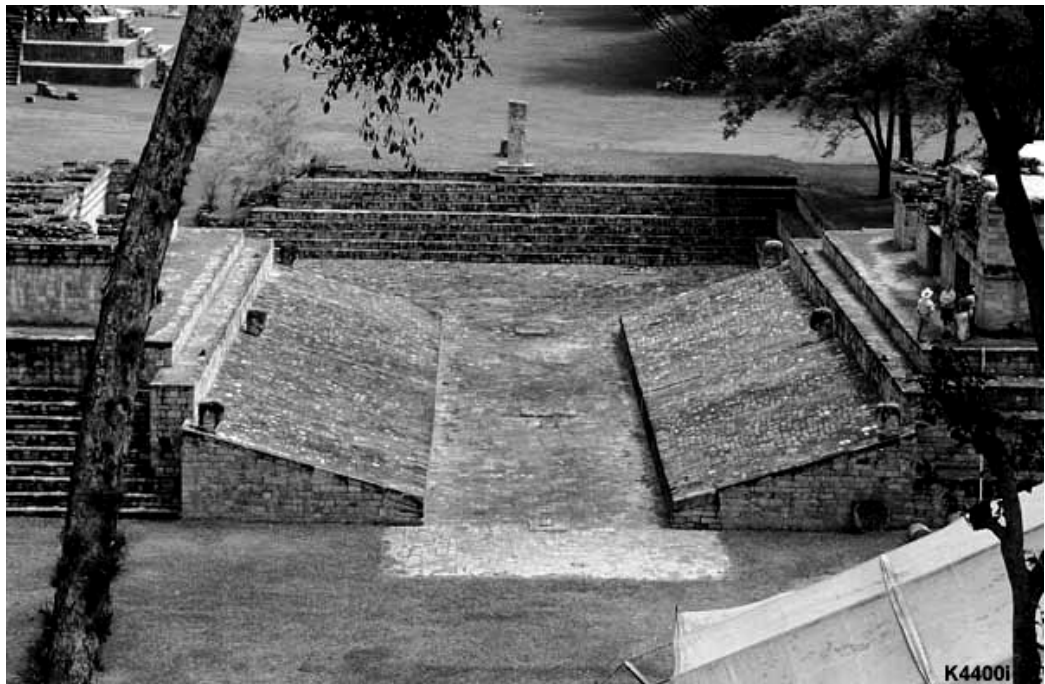
The Pyramid of the Magician at Uxmal, México.

Below, the Palace at Palenque, Mexico.





The Main Plaza at Tikal, Guatemala.



The Beautiful Ball Court at Copán, Honduras



A giant stela at Quiriguá in Guatemala



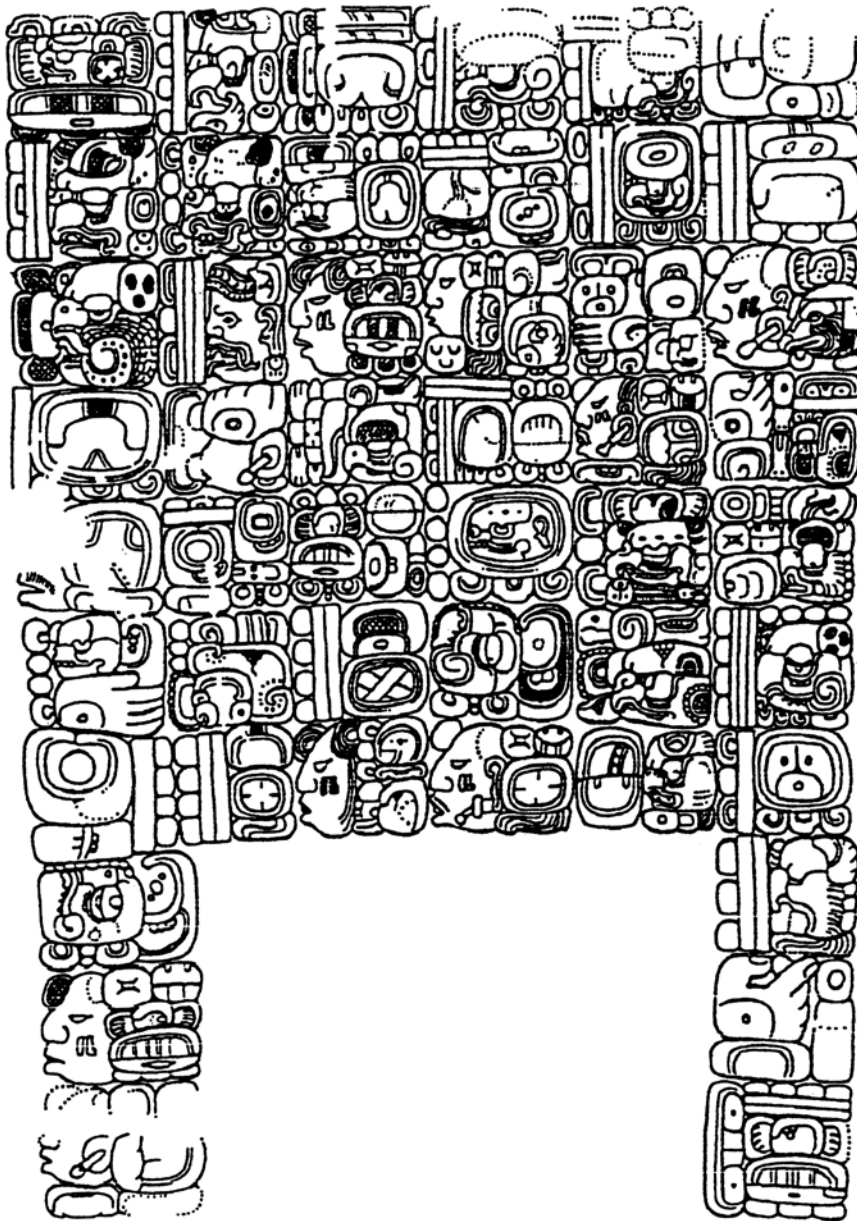
Above, the Observatory at Chichen Itza in Mexico



The Castle at Chichen Itza

THE BASICS OF ANCIENT MAYA WRITING

Maya writing is composed of various signs and symbols. These signs and symbols are often called 'hieroglyphs,' or more simply 'glyphs.' To most of us, these glyphs look like pictures, but it is often hard to say what they are pictures of, as for example, the following:



Glyphs from a stela at Piedras Negras in México

Unlike European languages, like English and Spanish, the ancient Maya writing did not use letters to spell words. Instead, they used a combination of glyphs that stood either for syllables, or for whole words.

We will call the glyphs that stood for syllables ‘syllable glyphs,’ and we’ll call the glyphs that stood for whole words ‘logos.’ (The technically correct terms are ‘syllabogram’ and ‘logogram.’)

It may seem complicated to use a combination of sounds and signs to make words, but we do the very same thing all the time. For example, you have seen this sign:



Everyone knows that this sign means “one way to the right.” The “one way” part is spelled out in letters, as usual. But the “to the right” part is given only by the arrow pointing to the right. Thus, this street sign is a combination of words and pictures that is very much like the way the Maya wrote things. After all, when a picture is worth a thousand words, why spell it out?

GLYPHS THAT STAND FOR SYLLABLES

The sounds in the ancient Maya language were mostly the same kind of sounds we have in English. They had the same vowels *a*, *e*, *i*, *o*, and *u*. In most cases, these vowels are pronounced as they are in Spanish today. Thus, *a* is pronounced like the *a* in father; *e* is like a long *a* as in day; *i* is like a long *e* as in keep; *o* is a long *o* as in dose; and *u* is like a long *u* as in duke.

The Maya also had symbols for most consonants joined to a vowel. So, they had the syllables *cha*, *che*, *chi*, *cho*, *chu*; *la*, *le*, *li*, *lo*, *lu*; *ma*, *me*, *mi*, *mo*, *mu*; *ta*, *te*, *ti*, *to*, *tu*; and so forth. Following the norm for Spanish, we will let the letter *j* be pronounced like an ‘h,’ and *x* is pronounced like ‘sh.’

The ancient Maya had glyphs only for those syllables that ended in a vowel. When they needed a syllable that ended in a consonant, they would put two glyphs together. For example, if they wanted to make the sound like the English word ‘note’ they would use the syllables *no* + *to* and not pronounce the last *o*. An easy way to write this is: *no-t(o)* where the parentheses show that the last *o* is silent. Although the last vowel is silent, in Maya writing the second vowel will usually be the same as the first vowel. (This is called the rule of ‘synharmony.’) For example, you would generally not write ‘note’ as *no-t(e)* because the silent vowel is not the same as the vowel that comes before it.

There is also sometimes ‘disharmony’ between vowels, meaning that the silent vowel is different from the previous vowel. Disharmony was often usually used when the Maya wanted to make a vowel much longer than normal, or different in some other way from the normal vowel sound. Thus, for example, to write noote (where the double oo indicates a very long vowel), they could write *no-t(i)*. Since the silent vowel is *i* rather than the expected *o*, we know that they wanted the *o* to be long.

The ancient Maya had some sounds that are not used in English or Spanish, but are common in modern Maya languages. These sounds are called ‘glottal stops,’ or simply ‘stops.’ In English, these are combinations of a consonant and a vowel that are a little bit explosive when you say them together. For example, when you say *hot opal*, the *t* and the *o* sounds said together create a stop.

We signify stops with an apostrophe, for example *t'o* for the *t* and *o* sound in hot opal. Thus, *to* is pronounced like ‘toe,’ but *t'o* is pronounced like the *t o* sound from ‘hot opal.’ (In the ancient Maya language the consonant *b* was only used with a glottal stop, like the *b* in “rob.”)

Unlike most modern languages, the Maya usually had more than one way to write a syllable. Thus, for example, while we always write the sound *ma* as *m+a*, the Maya had many ways to write the sound *ma*. So, two people named Maria might spell their names very differently in Maya glyphs. As you will soon

learn, the Maya scribes were very creative and intelligent men and women who loved to have fun with their language.

Okay, so how did the Maya write their syllable glyphs? Look at the chart on the next page and you will see.

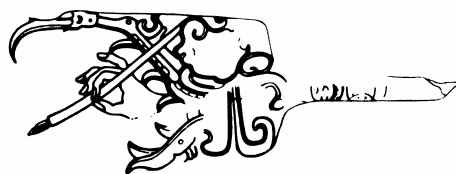
This chart is called a *syllabary* (kind of like an alphabet, except that it contains syllables instead of just letters). If you want to know the glyph for *ma* you only need to go to the square for *ma* and see the glyphs that you can use for that sound. So, you

can write *ma* as  , as  , as  , or as  .


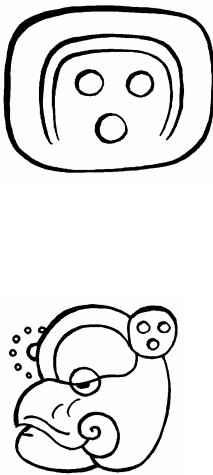

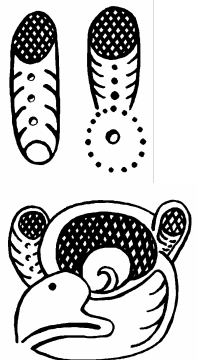


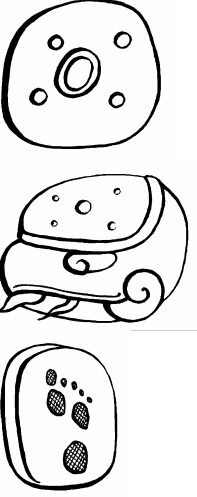

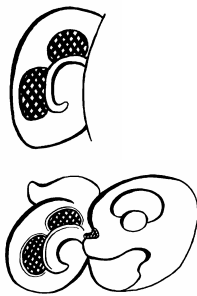
You get the idea. The same goes for many of the other syllables as well.

You've probably noticed that there are some squares where there are no glyphs. This is because there are still parts of Maya writing that is not known. The blank squares are syllables whose glyphs no one knows. (If you keep studying Maya glyphs, perhaps you will be the one who discovers these syllables.)

When we write a word using the syllables that make up that word, we say that we are writing the word 'phonetically,' which simply means we are writing it with sounds.



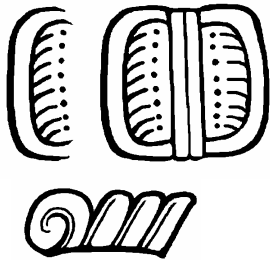

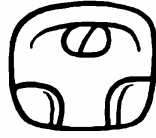


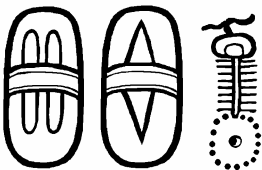








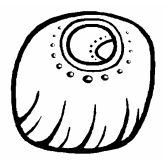
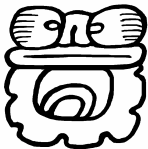

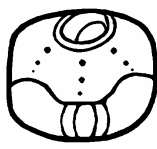

	a	e	i	o	u
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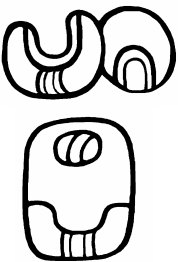





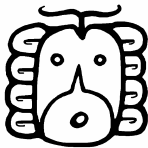
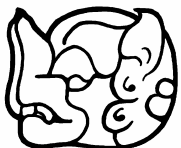









p r e v o w e i s					
					

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ch'					
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GLYPHS THAT STAND FOR WHOLE WORDS


As we said, Maya writing is a combination of glyphs that stand for syllables, or “syllable glyphs,” and glyphs that stand for whole words, or “logos.” There are 200 to 250 syllable glyphs that were used in Classical Maya writing, and about 500 logos.

So that we don’t confuse the glyphs for logos with the glyphs for syllables, we will write the names of the glyphs for logos in all capital letters.

For example, the color *white* can be represented by the logo

SAK  . The word for *sky* or *heaven* can be written with the

logo CHAN  . These are logos because they stand for whole words, without building up the word from its syllables.

Sometimes a logo looks like the thing it stands for. For example the glyph  means “jaguar,” and it actually looks like a jaguar. When a logo actually looks like the thing it stands for, we call it a ‘pictogram’.

Since the Maya liked to use a lot of variety and have fun when they wrote things, they used a combination of logos and syllable glyphs to create words. Thus, different scribes might choose different combinations of glyphs to write the same word. And since scribes were usually also artists, they would use their

creativity and carve or draw the same glyph differently. Thus, while some aspects of Maya writing follow precise rules, other parts vary depending upon the scribe. As you learn to write in Maya glyphs, you should stick to the rules, but like the ancient Maya scribes, be creative as well.



WRITING WORDS WITH GLYPHS

Now suppose we want to write the word for ‘jaguar’ in Maya script. The ancient Maya word for jaguar was *b’alam* (or more precisely, *b’ahlam*). (Remember that the *b’* simply indicates a glottal stop after the letter *b*.) The following 5 groups of glyphs are all perfectly correct ways to write the word *b’alam*, or jaguar.



B’ALAM



ba’ la
ma





The glyph on top is basically just a picture of a jaguar. This is the pictogram (and the logo) for *B'ALAM*.

Next, the word *b'alam* is written using the sounds that make up the word. That is, the word is written phonetically.

Remember, to write a word phonetically we break up the word into syllables. So *b'alam* is rewritten as *b'a-la-m(a)*. The parentheses around the last *a* shows that it is silent. So, if you go to the syllabary and find the squares for *b'a* and *la* and *ma*, then place them all together, you will get the glyph for *b'alam* shown on the second row of the illustration. As we explain later, when glyphs are placed together to form one group, they will be read more or less from left to right and from top to bottom.

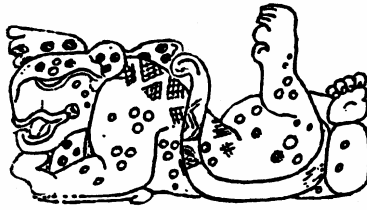
The three bottom glyphs in the illustration are combinations of the pictogram *B'ALAM*, and the sounds that make up the word. The pictogram is included in these glyphs for *b'alam*, but also the glyphs for one or more of the syllables are included. When a word is written in this way, it is normal to include the first and/or last syllables, but not the middle syllables of the word. You can think of these extra syllables as 'helper syllables' for the logo or

for the pictogram. (Technically, these are known as ‘phonetic complements.’)

Another example is the glyph for heaven or sky, which we saw earlier. We can write heaven/sky as . But, a more common form is . This glyph block contains the logo for heaven/sky, plus the helper syllable *na* underneath. This helper makes it easier for us to recognize and pronounce the glyph. The second form is a logo plus a syllable glyph, *CHAN-n(a)*, with the final *a* being silent.

Other than being creative, it is not clear why the Maya would include the syllables for a word when the pictogram for the word is given. But, for clarity, we do the same thing. For example, we all know that a big red octagon means STOP. Yet, usually within that big red octagon there is also the word STOP written out.

We use shortcuts for words much like the Maya did as well. For example, we use the first and last letter of many words as a way to abbreviate the words, (Dr. for doctor, or hr. for hour). Also, we use the first letters of a string of words to stand for the whole group of words (for example, NYC for New York City, JFK for John Fitzgerald Kennedy, or DA for District Attorney). Also, we frequently use abbreviations that pick up the most prominent sounds in a word (for example, X-LRG for Extra-Large, pls for please). The Maya used syllables instead of letters like we do, but the idea is really the same.



A Full Body Glyph for B'ALAM

BLOCKS OF GLYPHS

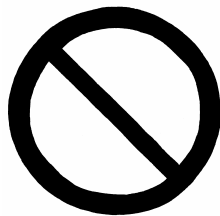
The glyphs for *b'alam* show that an ancient Maya word was often a combination, or block, of several other glyphs. (The technically correct term is a 'collocation' of glyphs.) Usually there is the main sign or glyph, together with other glyphs that serve as prefixes, suffixes, superscripts, and subscripts. We have all these in our language too. For example, think about the simple word *do*. If we say *undo*, *do* is the main word (like the main sign), and *un* is the prefix. If we say *doable*, *do* is the main word and *able* is the suffix. We can also say *undoable*, which has both a prefix and suffix to the main word *do*.

Also like ancient Maya, we use subscripts and superscripts, but usually more in mathematics and science than in everyday speech. For example, 3^2 (3 squared) has the main number 3 and the superscript 2. The sign for water H_2O uses the subscript 2.

We can do the same thing with signs and pictures instead of words and numbers. For example look at the following picture. Here we have the main sign (a logo, and a pictogram) of a smoking cigarette:



And below we have the secondary sign (a logo) for 'No' or 'Do Not:'



When we put them together, we get 'No Smoking:'



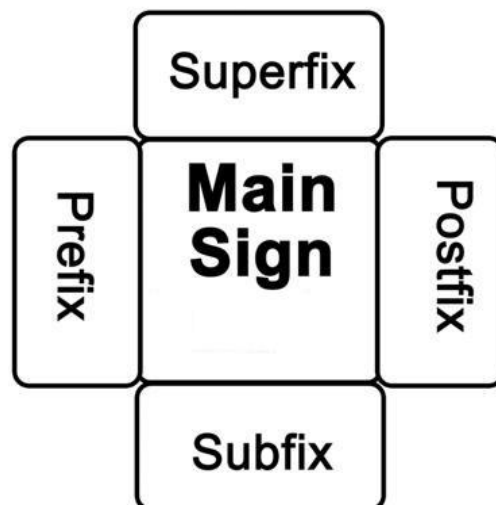
Of course we use signs instead of words in many other ways as well. We all know what is meant by a thumbs up, a wink, a shrug of the shoulders, or a tapping of the foot. No words are needed. The sign works just fine, if not better.

Even in everyday writing we use symbols that stand for whole words. Everyone knows that \$, #, %, and ÷ stand for the words *dollar*, *number*, *percent* and *divided by*. In fact, all of our numerals are logos. For example 4, 7, and 21 are logos for the words *four*, *seven*, and *twenty-one*.

On the computer we also use many signs (or “icons,” which are just pictograms) instead of words. To save to disk, we click the picture of the disk; to print we click the picture of the printer; to open a file we click the picture of the open file folder.

Similarly, companies have their logos, countries have their flags, and religions have their signs (the cross, the star of David, the crescent, etc.). Thus it is easy to see that like the Maya, we use signs all the time. The only difference is that we don’t use signs very much when we write.

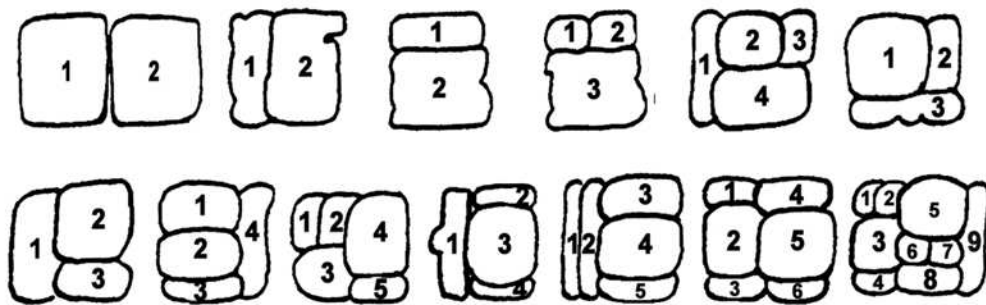
Now all we need to know is how the Maya put together all their signs, symbols, and glyphs to make something that could be understood. Here is a picture of the parts in a simple glyph block.



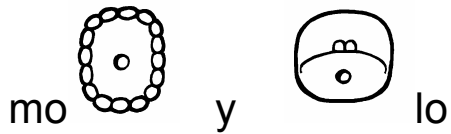
As shown, the main sign in the middle will usually be the biggest sign in the group. In ancient Mayan, like Spanish or English, only a few of all the possible prefixes, suffixes, etc. will be used in a single word.

To make sense of a word, we have to know the order of the parts. For example, the word ‘undoable’ makes sense, but ‘abledoun’ and ‘dounable’ do not make any sense. The normal order of the parts in ancient Maya glyph blocks was roughly from left to right and from top to bottom.

The problem is that glyph blocks could get a lot more complicated than the simple one shown above. Here is a guide to reading more complicated glyph blocks in the right order.



Finally, sometimes the Maya would combine two glyphs into one single glyph. This is called a ‘conflation’ of glyphs. For example, take the syllables *mo* and *lo*. The glyphs for these are



To write *mo-lo* the Maya would combine the two glyphs above to get



Now, believe it or not, you are ready to start writing words in Maya glyphs. In the next chapter, we will show you how to write your name in Maya glyphs, and then in the following chapter how to write the name of your town.

Be creative, and have fun!



In Maya myths, scribes were often shown as monkeys. Like the monkey, the scribe always seems to have fun.



Chapter 2

How To Write Your Name

In Maya Glyphs



Lady Xook of Yaxchilán

In this chapter we will teach you how to write your name in Maya glyphs. We will take you through the process, step by step.

Step 1. Divide your name into Maya syllables.

As explained above, written Maya syllables always end in vowels, although at times the vowels were silent. So, to start, you will divide your name into syllables that end in vowels. Thus, you may have one or more ‘extra’ syllables when you write your name in Maya syllables. Remember too, when you need a syllable with a silent vowel, the silent vowel should be the same as the vowel that comes before it.

For example, if your name is Ana, you have it easy. You can write Ana as *a-na*. Both syllables end in vowels, just as you want.

If your name is Adam, it is a little harder. But, using the silent vowel rule, Adam can be written as *a-da-ma*. Here the last *a* is silent, so it is better to write it as *a-da-m(a)*. Note that we chose *ma* as the last syllable (rather than *me*, *mi*, *mo*, or *mu*) because we want the silent vowel to be the same as the vowel in the syllable that comes before it.

The silent vowel can also come somewhere in the middle of the name. For example, if we write Antonio in Maya syllables, we get *a-n(a)-to-ni-o* .



Step 2: Find your syllables in the Syllabary Chart

After you've divided your name into syllables, look in the syllabary chart to find the Maya glyphs for each syllable. If you find glyphs for all the syllables, that is great.

What if you know the syllables you need, but one or more of the squares you need in the chart is empty? If the square you need is empty, it means that the Maya glyph for that syllable is not known. For example, suppose you need the syllable *wu*. In the syllabaries, there is nothing in the squares for *wu*. In these cases use *consonant+a* plus the vowel you need. So, for example, the correct substitution for *wu* is *wa+u*.

Now, what if your name has a consonant that isn't even in the syllabary? A common case is a name that contains an *r*. Suppose your name is Maria, and so the syllables are *ma-ri-a*. As you will see, there aren't any *r* syllables in the syllabary at all. This is because the ancient Maya did not have words that had *r* sounds.

So, we have to make a substitution that sounds similar. For Maria, we would write ma-li-a. This may seem unfair, but it is okay. All we are doing is changing the name a little bit to reflect how the ancient Maya would probably pronounce your name. (We do this all the time ourselves for names of people and places in other countries. For example, in Italy they say Roma, but in the United States we say Rome.)

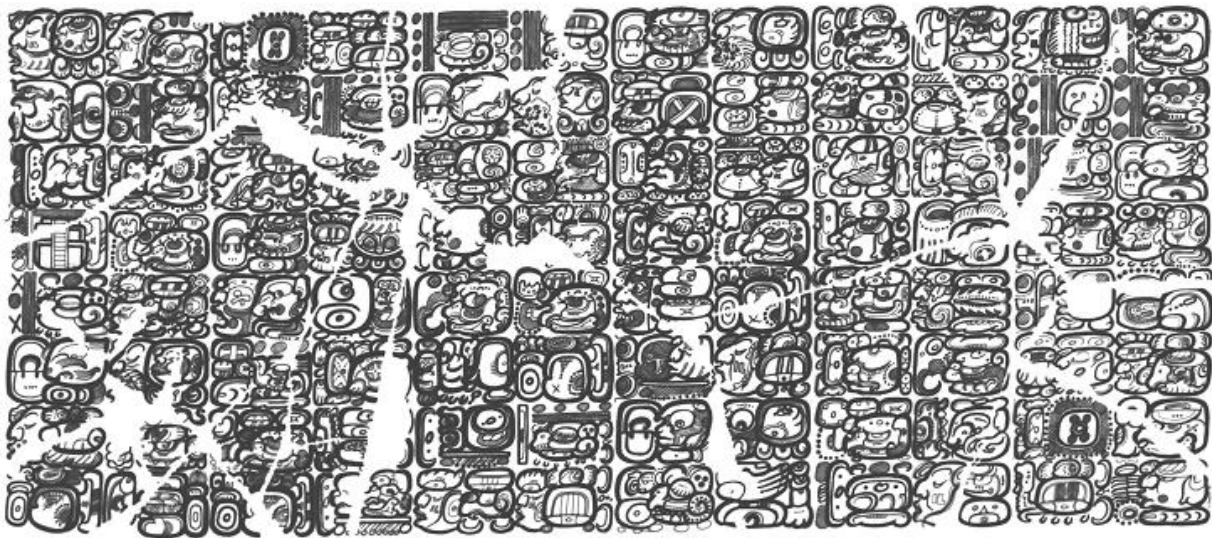


Table of 96 Glyphs, Palenque Mexico

Here are some other substitutions that you may need:

CONSONANT SUBSTITUTIONS:

C (soft as in Cindy) - Use **S+vowel** (i.e. sa, se, si, so, or su)

C (hard as in Cathy) - Use **K+vowel**

D Use **T+vowel**

F Use **P+vowel**

G (soft as in George) - Use **Ch+vowel** or **T+vowel**

G (hard as in Gary) - Use **K+vowel**

J Use **Ch+vowel** or **T+vowel**

Ph Use **P+vowel**

Q Use **Ku+W+vowel** [Ex. qua=ku+wa and qui=ku+wi]

R Use **L+vowel**

Sh Use **X+vowel** [X is pronounced as 'sh']

St Use **Tz+vowel** [Ex. Kristy = ka-li-tzi]

Th Use **T+vowel** or **X+vowel**

V Use **W+vowel**

Z Use **Tz+vowel**

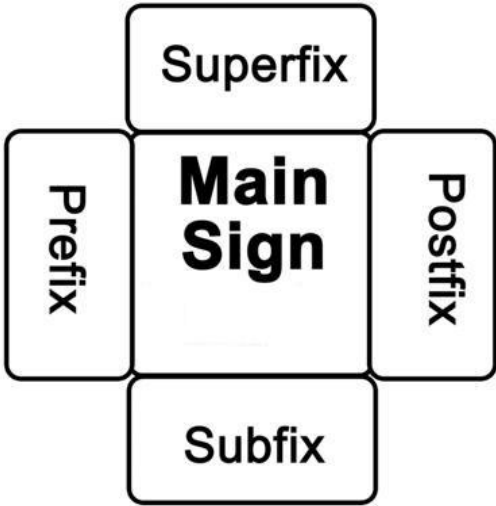
Now, before picking out the glyphs for each syllable in your name (or its substitution), there is one more thing you must do: pick a "main" syllable. If your name has 2 syllables, use the syllable that is accented when you pronounce your name. If your name has 3 or 5 syllables, the main syllable should usually be the

middle syllable. But if your name has 4, or 6 syllables, you should choose one of the syllables near the middle of your name to be the main syllable. Ideally, this syllable should be a syllable that is emphasized in the pronunciation of your name, and it should be a syllable that has a nice square-shaped glyph in the syllabary chart. (For example, for Antonio, you would use *to* as the principal syllable.)

Step 3: Place the Glyphs in a Glyph Block

So now we want to make a glyph block of the syllables in your name. Remember the skeletons from the last chapter that shows how individual glyphs are placed together to make a glyph block, or in our case, to make a whole name.

[Prefix and Superfix for syllables that come before the main syllable]



[First syllable in name usually goes in Prefix space]

[Postfix and Subfix for syllables that come after main syllable]

The main sign is where you will put the main syllable in your name. If possible, the main syllable glyph should be one of the bigger square shaped glyphs. The syllables that come before the main syllable will be in the prefix and superscript positions, and the very first syllable usually goes in the space for the prefix. The syllables that come after the main syllable will go in the positions for the suffix and the subscript. You should try to use smaller glyphs for all the syllables, except for the main syllable.

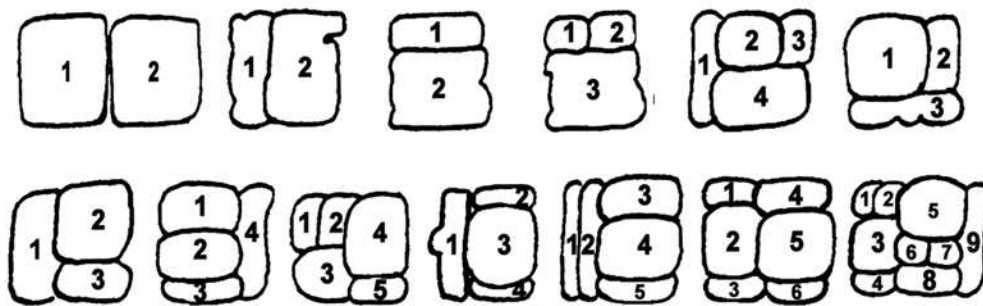
If, for example, your name has five syllables, the first syllable goes in the prefix position and the second syllable goes in the superscript position. The middle syllable will usually be the main syllable, and so go in the position for the main glyph. Then the next-to-last syllable will go in the suffix position, and the last syllable will go in the subscript position.

Wherever possible, all the syllable glyphs should be bunched around the main glyph, and in fact they should touch it. You should rotate each glyph to make it fit closely with the main glyph. You can also stretch out one or more glyphs as needed to make one nice group. In the end, you want something that looks like a square with rounded corners, sort of like a square shaped pebble.

You might notice that some of the glyphs have an open part on one side. Think of this part as the 'suction cup' for the glyph. This is the part of the glyph that you want to use to hook up or stick the glyph onto the main sign.

Of course, you may not need to use all the positions. That's okay. Just use what you need.

If your name has more than 5 syllables, or if you just want to experiment with different placements, use the placements in the following chart:



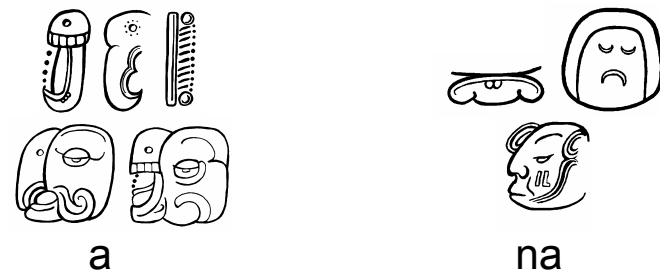
Be creative. Experiment. Make your glyph personal and something you really like. And remember, you should follow the rules, but otherwise it is good to play around and have fun.

Once you've made the glyph for your first name, think about how you want to make glyphs for your other names. The process is exactly the same. Go back to Step 1 and follow the same steps to spell any name you like in Maya glyphs.



SOME EXAMPLES

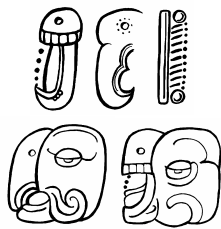
Let's start with an easy example and suppose again that your name is Ana. We can easily write Ana in Maya syllables as *a-na*. Looking at the syllabary we see that we have a nice selection of ways to write these two syllables. These are



If Ana is your name, you can choose which glyphs to use for the syllables of your name. If you like animals, you might choose one of the animal heads on the left. Then, you could write your name as:



Now let's take a name that is just a little harder --- Alan. In Maya syllables, Alan is written as *a-la-n(a)*, where the parentheses indicates that the last *a* is silent. The glyphs for each syllable are as follows:



a

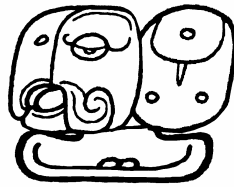


la



na

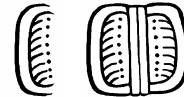
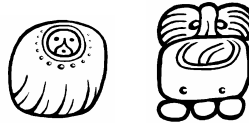
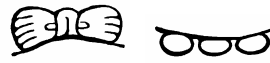
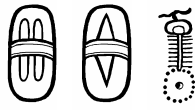
If your name is Alan, you get to decide how to write your name, but here's one nice way:



a la
n(a)

Now let's try something a little harder. Suppose your name is Thomas. To write this name in Maya glyphs, we first write break the name into the syllables *ta-ma-s(a)*, which sounds like the name Thomas, remembering that the *a* in parenthesis is silent. Here we have a name that we pronounce in 2 syllables, but has 3 Maya syllables.

Next, we go to the syllabary, where we see that we have quite a selection of glyphs to choose from for each syllable. From the syllabary, the possibilities are

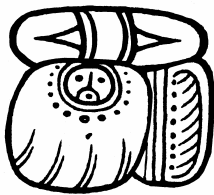


ta

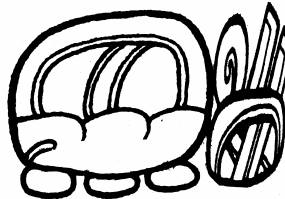
ma

sa

Now we choose the syllables we like and place them in the right order in a glyph block to spell the name. Here are two beautiful possibilities:



ta
ma s(a)

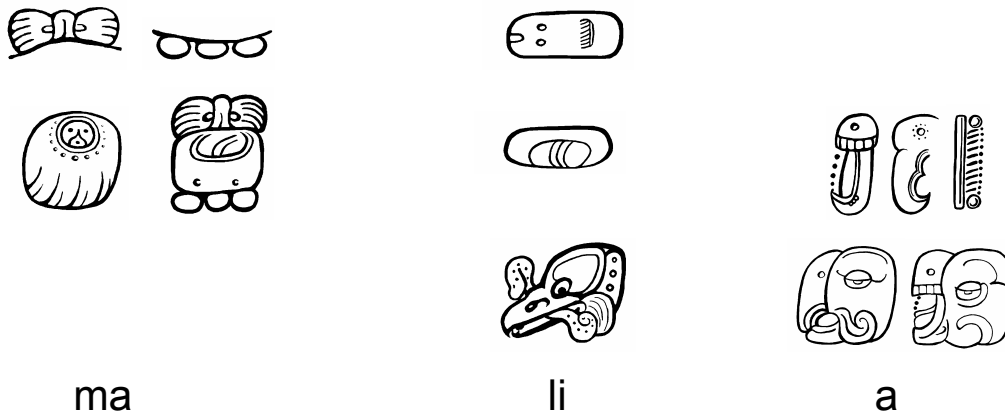


ta
ma s(a)

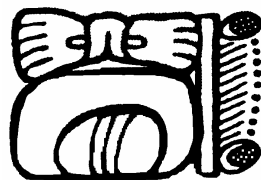
Make sure that you can see the three syllables *ta-ma-s(a)* in each of these two spellings of Thomas.

As you can see by now, there are always many ways to write a name in Maya glyphs, so in the end the way you spell your name can be very unique to you.

As a final example let's write the name Maria in Maya glyphs. Maria can be broken down into the syllables *ma-ri-a*. But, as we explained earlier, there was no *r* sound in the ancient Maya language, so we have to make a substitution and rewrite Maria as *ma-li-a*. Looking at the syllabary, we have the following:




Here's one way to put the syllables together to form the name Maria:



Note that in order to write Maria, we stretched the *li* syllable glyph to make it taller, and we rotated the final *a* syllable glyph 180 degrees. But if your name is Maria, you may choose to do it differently. After all, it's your name.


Now suppose you want to use Maya glyphs to write “My name is Ana.” How would we do that? We know how to write the name, so now all we need to know is how to write “my name is.”

Unlike us, when a Maya king or queen had something written about themselves, they would refer to themselves as “he” or “she” instead of “I.” And, to name someone, the Maya used a glyph that literally meant “it is his/her picture,” because whenever they named themselves, they also had a portrait. This glyph is

the logogram *B’AAH* , which is used together with a glyph that means “his,” “her,” “he,” or “she,” depending on the context. This glyph is simply *u*. As you will see in the syllabary,

one form for *u* is .

Thus, to say “his/her name is” or “he/she is known as,” you

can write , shown here with the phonetic complement *hi* on top. So, if you want to write “My name is Ana” you would write




Her name is



Ana.

Remember, of course, that when you say “she” or “he” you are referring to yourself, just as the ancient Mayas would do.

It is also possible, although much less common in ancient Maya writing, to refer directly to oneself with the words “me” and

“my.” The glyph for “me” and “my” is the syllable *ni*, .

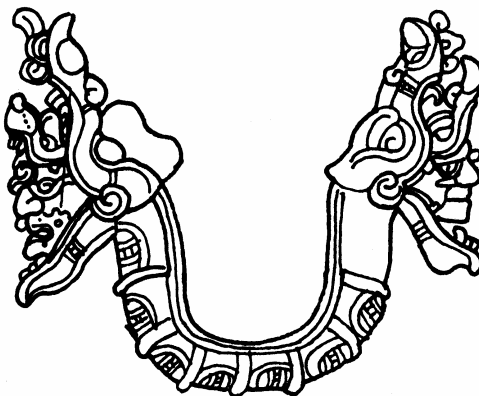
Combining this with the verb for “to be known as” we can write “I am known as Alan” with these glyphs



I am known as
(My name is)



Alan.



A Serpent Bar, a Mayan symbol of kingship.