Inca Communication
The Language of the Inca

The official language of the Inca people was Quechua (KEH-choo-ah). No one knows what the Inca spoke before they spoke Quechua. As the Inca had no written language, there are no clues to help solve that mystery. Quechua is still spoken by the Andean peoples of Peru and Bolivia. Here are some words in Quechua:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Quechua</th>
<th>English</th>
<th>Quechua</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>baby</td>
<td>wawa (wa-wa)</td>
<td>house</td>
<td>wasi (wa-see)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>bridge</td>
<td>chaka (cha-ka)</td>
<td>man</td>
<td>ghari (gar-ee)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>corn</td>
<td>sara (sa-ra)</td>
<td>woman</td>
<td>warmi (war-mee)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>dog</td>
<td>alg’o (al-ko)</td>
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How do we know about the Incas if there was no written language? One way is by legends and stories handed down through generations. The other way is through the writings of some the Spaniards who wrote about the Inca culture even though they were destroying it. One writer, Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala, illustrated his writings. Even though he wasn't born until after the Spanish conquest, his mother was inca and he tried to show Inca life in his drawings.
Incan Relay Roadrunners

The Mailmen

The job of Inca roadrunner was a specialized profession in the Inca Empire. Young men studied how to be an Incan roadrunner, or *chasqui*. Incan *chasquis* carried orders and news from one end of the entire to the other. They were the mailmen of the Incan Empire. Messages always reached the Sapa Inca accurately. If it was discovered that a message was not accurate, punishment was severe.

This relay system was so effective that runners could carry messages at a rate of about 250 miles a day. Without these specially trained Incan mailmen, controlling the vast Inca Empire would have been next to impossible.

The runners did not have guards. They did not carry weapons with which to defend themselves. They ran alone. They ran like the wind. The job of relay roadrunner carried great honor.
Each runner would run for one to two 1/2 miles along the famous Inca roads. There were little relay station buildings spaced along the roads where fresh runners watched and waited for the arrival of the messenger. As he approached the relay station, the runner blew loudly on a conch shell to alert the next runner to get ready. The next runner would appear, running along side the first. Without stopping, the first runner told the second runner the message. The second runner then speeded ahead until he reached the next relay station. Chasquis served for fifteen days at a time.
Systems of Measurement/Quipus: Using a base of ten, the quipus had a main string about two feet long. Many additional colored strings were tied to the main string. Each string had knots in it. The color of the strings and the distance between knots all had meaning to the ancient Incas. The quipus allowed messages to be carried by the Inca runners from one end of the empire to the other. Some people believe the Incas could even tell stories with the intricate knots of the quipus. It took training to read the quipus. Only a few people could write and read their secret messages.
When messages were secret, runners carried the message in the form of a quipu - a series of knots and colored string. The quipu would be handed from runner to runner until it reached its destination. There, a special quipu reader would decipher the message.
**Quipus**

The quipu was made of a main cord with different lengths of colored strings hanging from it. Each string had one or more colors and could be knotted to show the desired number. For example, to show the number 538, five knots would be made in the hundreds position higher up on the string, three knots in the tens position in the middle of the string, and an eight-looped knot in the ones position at the bottom of the string.

*Top Image:* Part of a Quipu  
*Center Image:* Quipu maker at Lake Titicaca  
*Diagram of a Quipu*
**Quipus:** The Incas used *quipus* (also spelled khipus) to keep careful track of thousands of details. Days of *mit'a* labor, baskets of grain, number of llamas, population, taxes paid, taxes owed, and many other things had to be accounted for without a written language. The type of knot, the length and color of the strings, and the positions of the knots all had meaning to those who could "read" them. The quipu keepers were called *quipucamayus* or *quipucamayocs*. 
Quipus were one of the clever inventions of the Incas.
Scientists and researchers today still study ancient quipus trying to learn how to interpret or "read" the quipus.

Even though the Incas had no written language, they were able to record and remember many things through the use of quipus.