Study Questions for Christopher Columbus’ “Letter to the King and Queen of Spain”

Please write out your answers to the questions that follow and/or take notes on the relevant areas in the text, Christopher Columbus’ “Letter to the King and Queen of Spain.” It is best to get into the habit of doing this while reading. You should complete this exercise after you have read and highlighted, or noted, areas of the text that you think are important. The purpose of this exercise is to help you follow the author’s intent and to think critically about his assertions. Below are a list of questions that, once answered, will ensure that you have a good outline of the letter’s purpose and an in-depth understanding of its historical importance.

Context:

Christopher Columbus’ “Letter to King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain” is a detailed report, indicating the navigator’s recommendations about the colonization and exploitation of the island of Hispaniola. This letter contains a number of interesting observations and suggestions by the captain regarding trade, the systematic processing of gold, and the construction of a permanent colony in the island, as well as the Christianization of the natives.

Scholars believe this letter was written ca. 1494, just after his second voyage to the New World. It is clear by reading the letter that this was not the first time Columbus had visited the island of Hispaniola, but he had also not yet reached the mainland coast. In fact, Columbus would not explore the mainland of South America until his Third Voyage, in 1498.

When reading this text, remember that 1494 was a particularly important date in the history of discovery and colonization. In June of that year, the kingdoms of Spain and Portugal signed the Treaty of Tordesillas, by which they divided the newly discovered lands between both nations along a meridian 370 leagues west of the Cape Verde islands.

Questions:

1. By reading his letter, do you think Columbus believed he had found a “New World”?

2. Why do you think Columbus put so much emphasis on the existence of gold on the island?

3. How did Columbus describe the natives?
4. Did Columbus describe these new lands as a dangerous and uncertain place or as a welcoming land?

5. In his letter, Columbus described how “…the number of colonists who desire to go thither amounts to two thousand.” What do you think are the main reasons for this colonist to undertake such a dangerous voyage to the Americas?

6. Why do you think Columbus put so much emphasis on the establishment of churches in these lands?

7. What do Columbus’ proposed town-plans tell you about Spanish colonization?

8. By reading this report, how might you describe Columbus’ role? Does he act as an explorer, a conqueror, or a missionary?