



Día de los Muertos Symbols A-Z

Symbols, meanings & classroom reference | Offerings, traditions, icons and related vocabulary



A-M | Remembrance spaces, offerings, memory and icons

Name: _____

A

Altar REMEMBRANCE SPACE

A prepared place for honoring people who have died. Altar forms and arrangements vary by family and region.

B

Bread / Pan de Muerto FOOD OFFERING

Seasonal bread associated with remembrance. Shapes, recipes, decorations, and meanings vary across Mexico.

C

Candles LIGHT / GUIDANCE

Candles bring light to remembrance spaces; a common interpretation is that their flames help guide returning souls.

D

Decorations VISUAL TRADITION

Flowers, cut paper, textiles, candles, and handmade objects can transform homes, graves, schools, and community spaces.

E

Ephemeral Art RELATED VOCABULARY

Temporary art made for a season or event. Flower petals, paper decorations, food displays, and altars may change or disappear.

F

Fotos / Photographs MEMORY

Portraits identify the people being honored and make an ofrenda personal to a family or community.

G

Graves / Cemetery REMEMBRANCE PLACE

Some families clean, decorate, visit, pray, tell stories, or spend time at graves during remembrance observances.

H

Honor & Memory CORE IDEA

The celebration centers on remembering deceased relatives and loved ones and maintaining family and community memory.

I

Incense & Copal SCENT / CEREMONY

Copal and incense scent ceremonial spaces and may be associated with prayer, cleansing, welcome, or sacred atmosphere.

J

Journey of the Souls BELIEF / STORY

Many traditions describe the dead as returning to visit the living; paths of petals, candles, and offerings help express that welcome.

K

Keepsakes PERSONAL OFFERING

Personal objects can represent the work, hobbies, style, faith, or personality of the person being remembered.

L

La Catrina POPULAR ICON

The elegant skeletal figure grew from José Guadalupe Posada's calavera imagery and Diego Rivera's later depiction.

M

Marigolds / Cempasúchil FLOWER / PATH

Bright cempasúchil flowers are widely used on altars and graves; petals may mark a symbolic path toward the ofrenda.

Cultural note: symbols and meanings vary by family, region, Indigenous community, religious practice, and time period.





Día de los Muertos Symbols A-Z

Symbols, meanings & classroom reference | Offerings, traditions, icons and related vocabulary



N-Z | Dates, offerings, symbols and related vocabulary

Name: _____

N

November 1 & 2 DATE / TRADITION

Major observances are associated with early November, while local calendars and customs can begin earlier or extend longer.

O

Ofrenda OFFERING / ALTAR

Ofrenda can mean the offering or the remembrance display itself: photographs, food, water, flowers, candles, and personal items.

P

Papel Picado CUT-PAPER ART

Decorative cut paper adds color and movement. INAH notes a common altar interpretation connecting papel picado with wind.

Q

Quiet Reflection RELATED VOCABULARY

Alongside music and public celebration, remembrance may also include prayer, silence, storytelling, and private reflection.

R

Rosary & Religious Images CATHOLIC INFLUENCE

Some families include crosses, rosaries, saints, or devotional images, reflecting Catholic traditions within many observances.

S

Sugar Skulls / Calaveritas CALAVERA TRADITION

Decorated sugar skulls are familiar altar objects and part of Mexico's playful visual traditions surrounding death and remembrance.

T

Tamales & Favorite Foods FOOD OFFERING

Families may prepare favorite or regional foods for the people being remembered. The exact dishes differ widely.

U

Unity & Family RELATED VOCABULARY

Shared preparation, visiting, storytelling, art, and food can bring families and communities together around remembrance.

V

Veladoras DEVOTIONAL CANDLES

Veladoras are devotional candles commonly placed on altars and graves to provide light and support prayer or remembrance.

W

Water OFFERING

Water is a common ofrenda item; one traditional explanation says it refreshes a returning soul after its journey.

X

Xoloitzcuintli ANCIENT SYMBOL / DOG

In Mesoamerican funerary traditions, the Xoloitzcuintli was associated with guiding souls on their journey toward Mictlán.

Y

Yellow-Orange Petal Path RELATED VOCABULARY

Cempasúchil petals may form bright paths leading toward an altar or grave in some communities.

Z

Zócalo & Community Celebration RELATED VOCABULARY

Zócalo is a common word for a central public square in Mexico; public festivities may take place in plazas and civic spaces.

Reference basis: Mexico's INAH and UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage materials. Related-vocabulary entries are labeled.

