



Día de los Muertos Teacher Lesson & Quiz Pack

TEACHER GUIDE | Grades 4-8 | Suggested time: 60-75 minutes



LESSON OVERVIEW

Students explore Día de los Muertos as a living Mexican remembrance tradition. They examine ofrendas, common objects and symbols, family memory, Indigenous roots, Catholic influences, regional variation, and respectful cultural interpretation.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Define Día de los Muertos and explain its focus on remembrance.
- Identify at least five common ofrenda elements and explain a traditional meaning for each.
- Distinguish widely used practices from family- or region-specific customs.
- Explain why respectful study avoids treating the celebration as a costume or stereotype.

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How can art, food, objects, stories, and ritual help people remember loved ones while keeping cultural traditions alive?

MATERIALS

- This PDF pack
- Symbols A-Z reference sheet
- Pencils or colored pencils
- Optional: photos of public/community ofrendas
- Optional: blank paper or construction paper

KEY VOCABULARY

ofrenda • cempasúchil • veladora • papel picado • calavera • copal • pan de muerto • Xoloitzcuintli • La Catrina • remembrance

CULTURAL CARE & STUDENT WELL-BEING

Do not require students to disclose a personal death, create an altar for a deceased relative, or participate in a religious practice. Students may use a historical, fictional, community, or admired person for design activities. Explain that traditions vary and no single altar represents every Mexican family or Indigenous community.

Teacher framing: teach the tradition as living cultural heritage - not as "Mexican Halloween."





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1. WARM-UP | 5-8 MIN

Show or describe an ofrenda. Ask: "What details do you notice? What might these objects communicate about memory?" Record observations without judging guesses yet.

2. MINI-LESSON | 12-15 MIN

Explain that Día de los Muertos commemorates deceased loved ones. Introduce Indigenous roots, Catholic feast-day influences, and the way traditions have changed across regions and generations.

3. SYMBOL STUDY | 12-15 MIN

Use the Symbols A-Z reference. Focus on photographs, cempasúchil, candles, water, favorite foods, papel picado, copal/incense, pan de muerto, sugar skulls, and personal keepsakes.

4. ACTIVITY | 15-20 MIN

Complete either Symbol Detective (page 3) or Design an Ofrenda Plan (page 4). Students may work individually or in pairs.

5. QUIZ | 15-20 MIN

Use the 20-question quiz on pages 5-6. For younger students, read questions aloud or assign only Parts A and B.

6. REFLECTION | 5 MIN

Use the exit ticket on page 8. Ask students to name one fact, one symbol, and one way traditions can vary.

DISCUSSION PROMPTS

- Why might a family choose a favorite food instead of the same food every year?
- How can a symbol have a common meaning and still be understood differently by different families?
- What is the difference between learning about a tradition and copying it without context?
- How can joy, humor, art, prayer, and grief exist together in remembrance?

DIFFERENTIATION

Support: provide the A-Z reference and allow oral answers. Extension: require students to cite two classroom sources and compare a home ofrenda with a public community display. Multilingual learners: invite Spanish/English vocabulary connections without requiring translation from any student.





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STUDENT ACTIVITY 1 | Symbol Detective

Name: _____ Date: _____



Directions: Match each item in Column A with the best classroom meaning in Column B. Write the letter of the meaning on the blank.

COLUMN A - ITEMS

1. ___ Cempasúchil
2. ___ Photograph
3. ___ Candle / veladora
4. ___ Water
5. ___ Papel picado
6. ___ Favorite food
7. ___ Copal / incense
8. ___ Sugar skull
9. ___ Personal keepsake
10. ___ Xoloitzcuintli

COLUMN B - MEANINGS

- A. Identifies the person being remembered
- B. A common offering connected with refreshment
- C. Cut-paper decoration; often linked with wind/movement
- D. Flower petals may mark a symbolic path
- E. Light connected with guidance, prayer, or remembrance
- F. Scent and ceremonial atmosphere
- G. Represents something meaningful about the honored person
- H. A calavera object in Mexican popular tradition
- I. Mesoamerican funerary guide associated with the journey to Mictlán
- J. Chosen because the remembered person enjoyed it

THINK LIKE A CULTURAL HISTORIAN

Choose one item above. Write one sentence explaining why its meaning should be described as “a common interpretation” rather than a rule followed by every family.





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STUDENT ACTIVITY 2 | Design an Ofrenda Plan

Name: _____ Date: _____



Plan a respectful remembrance display for a historical, fictional, community, or admired person. You do not need to use a deceased family member or share private information.

WHO IS BEING HONORED?

Name or description: _____

PHOTOGRAPH OR MEMORY IMAGE

What image would you use, and what would it communicate?

FLOWERS & LIGHT

How would you use flowers, petals, candles, or another source of light? Explain your choice.

FOOD & WATER

Choose a food or drink that connects to the person. Why is it meaningful?

PERSONAL KEEPSAKE

Choose an object that represents the person's work, interests, style, values, or story.

PAPER, TEXTILE OR DECORATION

How would you use papel picado, cloth, handmade art, or another decoration?

CULTURAL CARE CHECK

Write one sentence showing that your design does not claim every Día de los Muertos altar looks the same.





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STUDENT QUIZ | Part A - Multiple Choice | Questions 1-10

Name: _____ Date: _____



1. What is the central purpose of Día de los Muertos?
 - A. To honor and remember deceased loved ones
 - B. To celebrate the start of summer
 - C. To copy Halloween costumes
 - D. To commemorate a military victory
2. What is an ofrenda?
 - A. A type of dance
 - B. A remembrance offering or altar display
 - C. A musical instrument
 - D. A cemetery gate
3. Why are photographs commonly placed on an ofrenda?
 - A. To identify the people being remembered
 - B. To predict the weather
 - C. To decorate a school yearbook
 - D. To show a travel route
4. Which flower is strongly associated with many Día de los Muertos observances?
 - A. Rose
 - B. Tulip
 - C. Cempasúchil marigold
 - D. Daffodil
5. What is a common interpretation of candlelight on an ofrenda?
 - A. It guides or welcomes returning souls
 - B. It measures time
 - C. It replaces photographs
 - D. It represents rainfall
6. Why might a family place a favorite food on an ofrenda?
 - A. To represent something enjoyed by the person remembered
 - B. Because every family must use the same food
 - C. To keep the altar hidden
 - D. To replace flowers
7. What is papel picado?
 - A. Decorative cut paper
 - B. A clay cooking pot
 - C. A wooden cross
 - D. A musical rhythm
8. Which item is commonly offered as refreshment for the returning soul?
 - A. Water
 - B. Sand
 - C. Paint
 - D. Ink
9. What is pan de muerto?
 - A. Seasonal remembrance bread
 - B. A cemetery flower
 - C. A prayer candle
 - D. A paper decoration
10. Which statement about Día de los Muertos traditions is most accurate?
 - A. Every family follows identical rules
 - B. Practices vary by family, region, community, and time
 - C. Only one type of altar is correct
 - D. All symbols have one universal meaning





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STUDENT QUIZ | Parts B-C | Questions 11-20

Name: _____ Date: _____



PART B - TRUE OR FALSE

- 11. **TRUE / FALSE** Día de los Muertos reflects both Indigenous traditions and Catholic influences.
- 12. **TRUE / FALSE** Every Mexican family builds the same type of ofrenda with exactly the same objects.
- 13. **TRUE / FALSE** La Catrina is connected with José Guadalupe Posada's calavera imagery and later Diego Rivera's work.
- 14. **TRUE / FALSE** In Mesoamerican funerary traditions, the Xoloitzcuintli was associated with guiding souls toward Mictlán.
- 15. **TRUE / FALSE** November 1 and 2 are important dates, but some local observances begin earlier or continue longer.

PART C - SHORT ANSWER

16. Name three common ofrenda items and give one possible meaning or purpose for each.

17. Why is it inaccurate to describe Día de los Muertos simply as "Mexican Halloween"?

18. Give one example of how Día de los Muertos traditions can vary among families or regions.

19. Why is cultural respect important when learning about or creating art inspired by Día de los Muertos?

20. How can celebration and remembrance exist together during Día de los Muertos?





PART A - MULTIPLE CHOICE

1. A - Honor and remember deceased loved ones
2. B - A remembrance offering or altar display
3. A - Identify the people being remembered
4. C - Cempasúchil marigold
5. A - Guide or welcome returning souls
6. A - Represent something enjoyed by the person remembered
7. A - Decorative cut paper
8. A - Water
9. A - Seasonal remembrance bread
10. B - Practices vary by family, region, community, and time

PART B - TRUE OR FALSE

11. TRUE
12. FALSE - Practices and altar forms vary widely.
13. TRUE
14. TRUE
15. TRUE

PART C - SHORT ANSWER | ACCEPT EQUIVALENT RESPONSES

16. Any three, with reasonable meanings: photo=identity/memory; candle=light/guidance/prayer; marigold=flower/path; water=refreshment; food=favorite offering; papel picado=decoration/wind; copal=ceremonial scent; keepsake=personal memory.
17. Día de los Muertos is a distinct Mexican remembrance tradition with Indigenous roots and Catholic influences. Its purpose, history, and practices are not simply a version of Halloween.
18. Examples: different foods, altar designs, dates, flowers, prayers, cemetery practices, community events, regional Indigenous traditions, or whether a family builds an ofrenda at all.
19. Respect helps avoid stereotypes and false claims, recognizes living communities, and separates learning/appreciation from treating sacred or meaningful practices as costumes or props.
20. Students may note that families can remember loss while also sharing art, food, music, humor, stories, prayer, and time together. Joy and grief can coexist.

ACTIVITY KEYS

Symbol Detective: 1-D, 2-A, 3-E, 4-B, 5-C, 6-J, 7-F, 8-H, 9-G, 10-I
Fact or Overclaim: 1-Overclaim, 2-Fact, 3-Overclaim, 4-Fact, 5-Fact

SCORING SUGGESTION

Questions 1-15: 1 point each. Questions 16-20: 2 points each. Total: 25 points. For short answers, award 2 points for accurate explanation, 1 for partial understanding, 0 for incorrect or blank.





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EXTENSION ACTIVITIES, QUICK RUBRIC & EXIT TICKET

Name: _____ Date: _____



ACTIVITY 3 - FACT OR OVERCLAIM?

For each statement, write FACT if it is supportable as written or OVERCLAIM if it makes a tradition sound universal. Rewrite each overclaim more carefully.

1. "Every Día de los Muertos altar has exactly seven levels."
2. "Cempasúchil flowers are widely associated with Día de los Muertos."
3. "All Mexican families celebrate in the same way."
4. "Photographs and favorite foods can make an ofrenda personal."
5. "Meanings can vary by region, family, Indigenous community, and time period."

EXTENSION IDEAS

- Compare a public community ofrenda with a family/home ofrenda using two reliable sources.
- Create a symbol card with Spanish/English vocabulary, an illustration, and a culturally careful meaning.
- Research La Catrina: compare Posada's calavera with Diego Rivera's later representation.
- Research the Xoloitzcuintli in Mesoamerican funerary traditions and explain why "spirit animal" can be too broad a label.

QUICK ACTIVITY RUBRIC | 12 POINTS

Historical / cultural accuracy	0-3
Explains meanings with context	0-3
Respectful language & avoids overclaims	0-3
Completeness, clarity & effort	0-3

EXIT TICKET

One new fact I learned:

One symbol or object I can explain:

One example of how traditions may vary:

Fact basis: Mexico's INAH and UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage resources. Meanings are presented as common interpretations, not universal rules.

