

Writing sample: The American Potluck

(503 words)

When you hear someone say they're having a potluck, that means they are hosting guests for a meal, but each guest will bring a part of the meal. It can be breakfast, or lunch, but most commonly people have potluck dinners. Americans love potlucks. I have them all the time. In a practical way they distribute the cost of the party over several people, but they also build a sense of community and participation as people share their favorite dishes.

The American potluck contrasts sharply with the tradition of providing all food and drink when you have guests. My father is third generation Mexican-American and he thinks it doesn't sound right to ask guests to bring their own food to a party. He believes a good host provides everything their guests could possibly need. This is a common attitude around the world. Why would you invite someone to your home and then ask them to cook for you? It sounds rude and lazy.

But Americans don't find it rude or lazy when someone invites them to a potluck. It seems perfectly normal to us. We have potlucks at work -- especially for holidays or special occasions -- in our private homes, at our places of worship and as community events. We like the idea that each person adds their touch to the menu. Things get particularly interesting when people cook family dishes or make things following a "secret recipe."

Although the old-fashioned way to do a potluck is to make the dish yourself, it's perfectly acceptable to bring food you've purchased. I have had many potluck parties over the years where some have brought homemade food while others purchased fried chicken or hummus or chips & dip. I've had people walk in with boxed pastries from bakeries, buffalo wings from Jewel supermarket, cartons of ice cream or six-packs of beer. A potluck will accept just about anything as a contribution. If the host is providing the main course (which is usually a good idea), desserts, drinks and side dishes are often requested.

The habit of bringing something to a party in someone's home is so common that when I invite people over, even if I don't say the word "potluck," they often ask what they can bring. Likewise, when I'm invited to someone's home for a meal or party, even if it's not a potluck, I ask, "What can I bring?" Sometimes the host will respond, "Nothing," but sometimes they'll say it would be nice if you could bring a bottle of wine, for example. This is very standard social etiquette.

While it might seem strange for someone to have a party that they expect their guests to cook or shop for, the potluck is a strong and popular tradition in the U.S. Feel free to ask the host what specific thing you can bring. If they say it doesn't matter or everything is taken care of or they leave the choice up to you, a bottle of wine or six-pack of beer is always welcome.

From my business blog://welcomedialogue.com/im-having-a-potluck/