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Day of the Dead:

A Joyous Celebration of Death

Project in Action

When Two Cultures Collide—Create and Reflect

In Mexico, the Day of the Dead is actually a celebration of life. What about Tomb Sweeping Day in Taiwan? Let's first compare and contrast how the two cultures honor their ancestors, and then create posters, newsletters, or stories to highlight the cultural differences.

Thinking Ahead

1. Watch the video and write T (true) or F (false) before each of the following statements.

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- _____ (1) Miguel is already dead, so he can see the dead.
- _____ (2) The dead can't cross the flower bridge unless their family members put photos of them on the family *ofrenda* (altar).
- _____ (3) The only way to send Miguel back home is to get his family's blessing.
- _____ (4) Miguel has to go back to his world by sunrise.

2. Look at these pictures of activities Mexican people do on the Day of the Dead. Choose one picture you find interesting and describe what activity it is.

A.



B.



C.



I like Picture A/B/C in which.... I find it interesting because....

Reading Strategy

Annotating

Annotating is how a reader reorganizes information from a text in his or her own way. Annotating helps readers remember, process, and further understand information from a text. Readers can highlight the most important points and their supporting details, draw connections between different pieces of information, circle special terms or new words, write responses to the content, or mark ideas to be clarified. These active reading activities help readers review and apply information later.

Do your own annotating while reading the text on the next page. Fill in the blanks beside the text with the keywords you find.

Reading Comprehension

- _____ Which of the following statements is true?
- (A) Mexicans believe in the afterlife and reincarnation*.
 - (B) The top level of an *ofrenda* symbolizes earth, and people put food and drink there.
 - (C) People in Mexico set up an *ofrenda* to welcome their departed family members.



DAY OF THE DEAD

Honoring the Dead with the *Ofrenda*

In Mexico, people celebrate the Day of the Dead on November 1 and 2. The festival's purpose is to invite the departed back to the world of the living. In order to welcome their deceased family members, Mexicans set up an altar called an *ofrenda* in their home.

An *ofrenda* usually consists of three levels.
① The top level represents heaven. People decorate it with photos of those who have died and statues of saints*, the Virgin Mary, and Jesus. The middle level symbolizes earth. There people put food and drink that their deceased family members loved. Finally, the lowest level stands for the underworld. Candles and incense* keep evil spirits away, and the dead can wash up with the water and towel provided.

By looking at *ofrendas*, we can begin to understand Mexico's unique cultural practices and ways of honoring the dead.

- _____ (Spanish)/altar (English)
- Mexico
- Day of the Dead: Nov. 1 and 2
- to _____ deceased family members

- ① _____ level—heaven— photos/statues of saints
- ② middle level— _____ favorite food and drink
- ③ lowest level—the underworld— _____ and _____ to keep evil spirits away; water and towel to _____

Reading Selection



Language Highlight

In Paragraph 4, a transitional word is used after a negative sentence to clarify what was just said. What is this transitional word?

Have you ever thought about what it would be like to have a deceased loved one return and accompany² you to a holiday celebration? The idea may scare you to death or at least make your hair stand on end, but this is the essential³ concept⁴ behind the Day of the Dead in Mexico⁵, where people celebrate death with joy and humor rather than mourn⁶ it with sorrow⁶. On this joyous occasion⁷, family members gather for a reunion⁸ in honor of those who have moved on to the afterlife⁸.

“

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The Day of the Dead is thought to have originated centuries ago with the Aztecs⁹. Nowadays it is celebrated passionately throughout Mexico on November 1 and 2. Traditionally, deceased children are honored on Nov. 1, while Nov. 2 is the day when departed adults are the main focus. During these 48 hours, the souls of the dead are believed to return to earth to visit their living family members. Instead of fearing the spirits of those they have lost, Mexicans anticipate⁹ their arrival¹⁰ and prepare for it. Days or even weeks in advance, they purchase necessary items and foods in local markets. These include marigolds⁹, candles, “the bread of the dead,” and decorated sugar skulls⁹ with the names of departed family members written on their foreheads⁹. They also tidy and restore¹¹ the graves⁹ and cemeteries⁹ where their family members are buried.

On the Day of the Dead, families assemble colorful altars⁹ in their homes to welcome returning spirits. On the altars, they place photographs of their deceased loved ones as well as beverages and dishes that those family members had a preference¹² for while alive. After this warm reception¹³ for the souls at home, it is usually late in the evening, and families head to the cemetery, where they

Reading Strategy

Annotating

- The following are the annotations made for Paragraphs 2, 3, and 4. Fill in the blanks with the keywords you find.

Paragraph 2

- The Day of the Dead originated with _____.
- The first day is for deceased _____.
- The second day is for departed _____.

Paragraph 3

Mexicans set up colorful _____ in their _____ to welcome the spirits.

Paragraph 4

Mexicans _____ death and _____ the cycle of life itself on the Day of the Dead with many special foods and activities.

Note the Details

1. When and where is the Day of the Dead celebrated?
2. How do people welcome returning spirits into their homes on the Day of the Dead?
3. What is the true meaning of the Day of the Dead?

decorate the graves and light one candle for each dead person. Cheerful and merry*, they feast¹⁴ and pray till

dawn¹⁵ with the sacred souls, transforming¹⁶ the normally
 35 horrifying graveyard* into a venue* of joy and celebration for the entire night.

Throughout the festival, colorful, cartoon-like representations of the dead can be seen everywhere. These include skeleton* and skull cookies, candies, flags, and
 40 toys. Many people also dress up in skeleton costumes, paint their faces to resemble¹⁷ skulls, and participate¹⁸ in performances and street parades. While doing so, Mexicans aren't mocking¹⁹ death. Instead, they are recognizing²⁰ it as an inevitable²¹ part of the natural cycle²² and would

45 rather embrace it than ignore it. By inviting the dead to return and sharing the pleasures of life with them, Mexicans are celebrating the cycle of life itself.

The Mexican Day of the Dead is an annual national event that brings together living hosts and non-living guests
 50 of honor. Hopefully it will never die away, since it allows people to accept a fact of life that awaits²³ us all. If we cannot escape²⁴ it, why not celebrate it?

—Written by Nick Kembel

Think and Reflect

1. Compare the Day of the Dead in Mexico with the Ghost Festival* in Taiwan. They seem to have a lot in common. Work with your partner and list one or two similarities they share.

The Day of the Dead in Mexico and the Ghost Festival in Taiwan share many similarities. For example, ... (Moreover, ...)

Think about...

festive atmosphere
 attitude toward the dead
 abundant offerings
 parties and celebrations

2. According to the comparison you made in Question 1, why do you think people do this thing/these things on the Ghost Festival in Taiwan?

In Taiwan, people believe/think/... Thus, they...

Think about...

attitude toward death
 attitude toward the dead
 religious belief

