

# ALTARES PARA EL DÍA DE LOS MUERTOS

According to Aztec tradition, one does not mourn for a departed one, for tears will fall on the path the soul must travel and the soul may slip and fall. *El día de los muertos* is a festive occasion, a time to celebrate, much like a family reunion. As the tradition goes, the souls of children return to visit their families on October 31 and leave on November 1. Once the children's souls leave, the souls of departed adults come to visit on the night of November 1 and leave on November 2.

In preparation for the *joyous* event, graves are repainted and families prepare **los altares** to welcome their departed loved ones. In order to decorate these altars, the family uses **las flores** and **las ofrendas** including items that were important to the person.

## El vocabulario (the vocabulary)


los muertos	the dead
la calavera	the skull
el esqueleto	the skeleton
los altares	the altars
las flores	the flowers
las ofrendas	the offerings (decorations)

## Las fechas (the dates)

Oct. 31 – La noche de duelo (The Night of Mourning)
Nov. 1 – El día de los santos (All Saints' Day)
Nov. 2 – El día de las almas (All Soul's Day)

## LOS ALTARES

Most Day of the Dead altars have several elements in common. However, there is no one way to create your altar. A general description of a traditional, full-sized altar is included here. *After the description is an explanation of YOUR project directions.*

Element of the Altar	
1.) <b>The arch.</b> Tie long sugar cane stalks (or other long but flexible material), one on each side, to back legs of a table and join them at the top with string. Decorate the arch by attaching flowers to it. The arch represents the passage between life and death.	
2.) <b>The base.</b> Place boxes, crates or risers on the table where you will build your altar in such a way that they create tiers to display elements attractively. Use a tablecloth to cover the table and boxes. Then place <i>papel picado</i> around the edge of the table and each layer.	
3.) <b>The photo.</b> Place a photo of the person to whom the altar is dedicated at the top, center of the altar. If there is no photo, it will be understood that your altar is in honor of all your ancestors.	
4.) <b>The elements.</b> Include representation of the four main elements of nature: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Earth - often symbolized by seeds</li> <li>Wind - often symbolized by a flute</li> <li>Water - often symbolized by shells (Also see "Water.")</li> <li>Fire - often symbolized by a candle (Also see "Candles.")</li> </ol>	
5.) <b>The water.</b> Place a glass of water on the altar. Water is a source of life and represents purity. It quenches the thirst of the spirits.	

6.) <b><u>The candles.</u></b> Candles represent light, faith and hope. The flame guides the spirits on their journey. Sometimes four or more candles are placed together to form a cross which represents the four cardinal directions, so that the spirits can find their way.	
7.) <b><u>The flowers.</u></b> Place flowers in vases or pull the petals out and scatter them over all the surfaces of the altar. If you use marigolds, the scent will be even stronger if you pull out the petals. The marigold is considered the traditional Aztec flower of the Toltec goddess, Xochiquetzal, the guardian of the graves. The bright colors of the marigolds and their fragrance are synonymous with Day of the Dead. Other common flowers include baby's breath, wild purple orchids, coxcombs and white amaryllis. Fresh flowers remind us of the impermanence of life.	
8.) <b><u>The colors.</u></b> Orange is the traditional color of the dead along with purple, white, gold, black and pink, as seen in the other important flowers. Green and red, the national colors of México, are also often present.	
9.) <b><u>The food.</u></b> Seasonal fruits and special bread (called <i>pan de muertos</i> ) are usually placed on the altar, along with other foods that the person enjoyed in life. Mexicans usually place tamales, mole, beans, tacos, tortillas, salsa and fresh fruit and hot chocolate on the altar. Fresh pumpkins and squashes and even favorite types of soda pop can also be added. The food is a feast that is laid for the dead to enjoy. It is believed that they consume the scents and the essence of the food. Sugar skulls are also a great addition to a Day of the Dead altar.	
10.) <b><u>The incense.</u></b> It is customary to burn copal incense, which clears the space of any negative energy or bad spirits, and helps the dead find their way. Copal is a tree resin, sweetened by mixing it with sage and grass. If copal is not available, use any incense.	
11.) <b><u>Personal items.</u></b> Include things that are specifically important to the person being honored. Include favorite children's toys, candy or sports objects.	
12.) <b><u>Symbolic items.</u></b> Altars are usually supplied with religious items like a portrait of the Virgin Guadalupe (Patron Saint of Mexico) and other saints, crosses and rosaries. Other traditional symbols include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Money to remind us that even if we need money we must also be generous with it.</li> <li>b. A frog, to represent fertility and also represents the twilight of each day.</li> <li>c. A feather of a rooster to remind us of dawn.</li> <li>d. A mirror to remember the duality of life and death.</li> <li>e. Calaveras, or skulls. In pre-Columbian times the skulls were symbols of death and sacrifice. They are now satirical and comical.</li> <li>f. Corn in its four stages to represent birth, childhood, adult life, and death</li> <li>g. The four seasons</li> </ul>	
13.) <b><u>The arrangement.</u></b> There is no one way to create a Day of the Dead altar. As long as you remember the basics, you can't go wrong. Arrange your altar in a fashion that is pleasing to the eye. Remember that the Day of the Dead is a time to celebrate the lives of those who have passed on before us. As such, it is considered disrespectful to the spirits to grieve when you first approach the altar.	
14.) <b><u>Check out this website to see photos of the real thing!</u></b> <a href="http://gomexico.about.com/od/dayofthedead/ig/Day-of-the-Dead-Altar-Photos">http://gomexico.about.com/od/dayofthedead/ig/Day-of-the-Dead-Altar-Photos</a>	

# EL PROYECTO: DUE

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**Objective:** Making a Day of the Dead altar can be a way for you to honor the life of someone important to you, or to remember your ancestors. You will create an altar *for yourself*. Imagine how your friends and family members might remember you someday.

**Directions:** Your project will be a piece of personal artwork. You will use the traditional directions you just read as a guide while building your *miniature* version of an altar.

- 1.) **Size:** The size of your project can be anything from the size of a deck of cards to the size of a standard shoebox. **WARNING:** *A smaller project still must include the same amount of decorations. Although it may seem like an easier option, it may not be. Smaller details can actually be more challenging.*
- 2.) **Name:** Your Spanish name must appear on the altar as the projects will be on display for your classmates (and schoolmates) to see. **NOTE:** *You do not need to include a traditional heading on the project itself.*
- 3.) **Assembly:** Create as authentic an altar as you can, using the traditional elements you just learned. You may use ANY materials you like to construct your altar: cardboard, wire, *papier mache*, modeling clay, Barbie food, pipe cleaners, paint, colored pencils, Play-Doh, etc. **NOTE:** *Parts should not be falling off as you present your project, but you may “set up” a little when you get here. Ask the teacher for details.*
- 4.) **Authenticity:** The more authentic elements you use (the more CHECKED elements you include), the more authentic and accurate your altar will be. **Check off** elements you use in the attached reading.
- 5.) **Reflection:** You will **type** a one-page, double-spaced reflection **in English**. Think ELA: introduction, body paragraphs with topic sentences and details, conclusion. It will describe:
  - a. Which elements you chose to include.
  - b. The significance (meanings) of those elements.
  - c. What you now understand about the Day of the Dead.
  - d. Your opinions of the holiday.

Your reflection will be displayed with your altar in class or in the hall display case. You will also share this reflection with classmates in small groups. Write your reflection **after** you are done building your project because your CHECKLIST of included elements will help you organize your reflection.

## **Grading rubric:**

	Max Points	Earned	Rationale
Assembly, Size, Name Included, General Directions	10		
Authenticity, Included Elements, Completeness	30		
Reflection Paper	20		
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>60</b>		<b>Overall Grade:</b>