

Holiday Traditions



Holiday Family Letters

Even in these days of email, texting and TikTok videos, traditional holiday family letters persist in popularity.

It's a tradition that helps people connect and catch up on the year's news.

To truly make it a family letter, ask each family member to contribute something to it. Even a young child can draw a picture while older ones can write a paragraph about what was most important to them in the past year.

WRITING THE CONTENT

Holiday letters should be cheerful, upbeat and concise.

American Stationery gives several guidelines on their blog, including, "A holiday letter is a bit of an art. It's finding that perfect balance between upbeat and sincere, realism and sugar-coating. ... It's taking it seriously while still having fun."

They recommend keeping the letter to a page if possible, but no more than a page and a half.

Start out with the biggest news of the year and follow it up with news of other major events, keeping them to a sentence or two. Don't hesitate to use humor or make jokes. Share your successes, but don't brag. While you want to stay upbeat, remember that you can share your griefs and losses.



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Not sure what events to include? Start with major life changes — births, deaths, job changes, graduations, retirement, marriages and divorces. Other topics can include any trips or vacations, a promotion at work, a new pet, or participation in a hobby or community events.

Another thing that American Stationery recommends is to personalize each letter with a unique sentence or two at the

top or bottom that directly addresses the person you are sending it to.

DESIGNING THE LETTER

You want your newsletter to look cheery and be visually attractive as well as having good content. You can purchase holiday stationery and print on it or make your own with seasonal borders and colored paper.

Select photos from the year,

especially those about events you mention in your letter. Some families like to include a family holiday portrait with everyone wearing holiday colors. You can even pick something that isn't in the letter and then add a sentence underneath describing where you were and what you were doing.

DELIVERING THE LETTER

In 2022, you have more options than just putting your

letter in an envelope with a stamp.

If you create a PDF of your holiday letter, you can send it to family and friends in an email or through social media. You could also turn your letter into a video that the family reads or performs and then put it up on YouTube or TikTok.

No matter what you choose, let this tradition be a fun one that spreads love this holiday season.

Holiday Book Reading

It's always a good time to read to one's children, but the holidays can be an even more special occasion.

It's a time when favorite stories get pulled out and read again and again to get everyone in the spirit of the season.

Three December holidays that are commonly celebrated in the United States are Christmas, Hanukkah and Kwanzaa. No matter your background, any of the following books can help your family celebrate both your traditions and those of your neighbors.

Set aside time each night during the holiday — whether Advent, the eight days of Hanukkah or the seven days of Kwanzaa — for reading aloud or curling up alone with egg nog before a fire.

CHRISTMAS

Ages 5 and under: “How the Grinch Stole Christmas” by Dr. Seuss, “Dasher” by Matt Tavares, and “Too Many Tamales” by Gary Soto.

Ages 6-12: “The Nutcracker in Harlem” by T.E. McMorrow, “The Legend of the Poinsettia” by Tomie dePaolo, and “The Road to Santiago” by Dan Figueredo.

Teenagers: “Gift of the Magi” by O.Henry, “Letters from Father Christmas” by J.R.R. Tolkien and “Silent Night: The Story of the World War I Christmas Truce” by Stanley



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Weintraub.

Adults: “A Christmas Memory” by Truman Capote, “Amazing Peace” by Maya Angelou and “The Christmas Box” by Richard Paul Evans.

HANUKKAH

Ages 5 and under: “Hanukkah Bear” by Eric Kimmel, “Meet the Latkes” by Alan Silberberg and “Hanukkah Hamster” by Michelle Markel.

Ages 6-12: “Hershel and the Hanukkah Goblins” by Eric

Kimmel, “Hanukkah at Valley Forge” by Stephen Krensky and “Hanukkah Moon” by Deborah Da Costa.

Teenagers: “Dreidels on the Brain” by Joel Ben Izzy “One Yellow Daffodil: A Hanukkah Story” by David A. Adler and “Hanukkah around the World” by Tami Lehman-Wilzig

Adults: “It’s a Whole Spiel: Love, Latkes and other Jewish Stories,” “A Different Light: A Hanukkah Book of Celebration” by Noam Zion and “How to

Spell Chanukah” by Emily Franklin.

KWANZAA

5 and under: “Together for Kwanzaa,” by Juwanda G. Ford, “Kevin’s Kwanzaa” by Lisa Bullard and “Seven Days of Kwanzaa” by Melrose Cooper.

Ages 6-12: “The Story of Kwanzaa” by Donna L. Washington, “Seven Spools of Thread,” by Angela Shelf Medearis and “Imani’s Gift at Kwanzaa” by Denise Burden-

Patmon.

Teenagers: “Kwanzaa” by Joanna Ponto and Carol Gnojewski, “A Very Special Kwanzaa” by Deborah Newton Chocolate and “The Kwanzaa Contest” by Professor Miriam Moore.

Adults: “Kwanzaa: Living on Principle” by Venus Jones, “Kwanzaa Klaus” by James Henry and “The Complete Kwanzaa: Celebrating Our Cultural Heritage” by Dorothy Winbush Riley.

Christmas Pickle Game

For many families, a Christmas morning tradition involves a pickle — not the kind you can eat, but a glass one hidden on the Christmas tree.

While there are many origin stories for this tradition — including many people who insist that it comes from Germany — there is no evidence to support most of them. Rather, they simply make for fun (and sometimes gruesome) stories about why people would associate a pickle with a Christmas tree.

CHRISTMAS PICKLE ORIGINS

Recent surveys of Germans led to the discovery that there aren't many Germans aware of the Christmas pickle tradition, making it unlikely that the tradition is from there. The website History Daily gathered several tales that might be the backstory for the tradition.

Spanish St. Nicholas. Three Spanish boys stopped at an inn while traveling home from school to visit their families for the holidays. A crazed innkeeper cut them up and put them in a barrel of pickles. Luckily for them, St. Nick came by, discovered them and revived them. The boys ever after hung pickles on their Christmas tree as a way of thanking the saint.

Dying Civil War Soldier.



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Another story centers a Civil War prisoner of war in Georgia. As he lay dying, he asked the guards if they would grant his final wish — find him a pickle, which was his favorite food. They did so and the result was miraculous. His wounds healed and he lived. Every Christmas after that, he put a pickle on a tree to remember the kindness of his captors.

Woolworth Sales Technique. Another origin

story takes place 20 years later in the late 1880s. Woolworth had started importing glass ornaments from Germany. Most of the fruits and vegetables sold well, but not the pickle. Faced with a surplus of ornaments, one sales clerk made up a story about an “old world” tradition. People loved it, so he told other Woolworth managers the story. People believed the story of the quirky Weihnachtsgurke, and the tradition took off.

CHRISTMAS PICKLE TRADITIONS

The tradition itself is fairly simple. On Christmas Eve, an adult in the house takes the pickle and hides it in the tree. Naturally camouflaged, it can often be hard to find. First thing in the morning, the family searches for it. The first child to see it gets an extra present or holiday treat or might be designated the first child to open a Christmas present.

Some places get a little more elaborate. The Pickle Packers International named Berrien Springs, Michigan, population 2,000, the Christmas Pickle capital of the world, according to the city's website.

For many years they celebrated with parades, an annual Christmas Pickle Festival and lots of pickle items for sale from the traditional ornaments to chocolate-covered pickles.

Burn or Bake a Yule Log

No one is absolutely certain of the origin of yule logs, though historians and folklorists have many theories tracing the practice back to Germanic paganism and middle ages Christmas celebrations.

The Yule Log, also known as the Yule Clog or the Christmas Block, is burned a little bit each night or is sometimes lit with candles rather than burned. Still others spur the literal translation and make a chocolate and cream cake known as a Yule Log.

Regardless of its origins, this tradition continues to brighten homes in the often-dark nights surrounding winter holidays.



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YULE AND YULETIDE CELEBRATIONS

Yule is celebrated on the winter solstice, which in 2022 is Dec. 21. It is marked as the birthday of the sun and celebrated with feasting, caroling and dancing.

At Yule festivals in Scandinavia, according to almanac.com, logs were lit to encourage the sun to return. Their “logs” were entire trees and burnt each night for 12 days. They would be lit each year with the remaining kin-

dling from the previous year’s tree. Sometimes they would be decorated with holly, ivy and pine cones or anointed with wine.

The ashes from the burnt log would be put under each family member’s bed to protect them and then later it would be spread over crops as fertilizer and among the livestock to keep them strong.

CHRISTMAS LOG CELEBRATIONS

Christmas logs are also

burnt for 12 days, starting on Christmas Day and ending on Epiphany (Jan. 6). The symbolism changed to that of hospitality to welcome the holy family and the ashes symbolized Christ’s eventual sacrifice.

Christmas/Yule logs often make appearances as gifts, decorations and centerpieces. A small log is tied with red ribbon and decorated. Others use them as Advent wreaths, putting the traditional pink, purple and white candles on them.

CUSTOM LOG MATERIALS

What are logs made of? It depends on where you are from and what you want the logs to do.

England traditionally uses oak logs while birch is popular in Scotland, cherry wood gets used in France and in Norway they use spruce or pine.

Pagans associate different meanings with different kinds of wood. According to *The Gypsy Thread*, oak is a symbol of strength and wisdom, pine is connected with prosperity, a

birch promised fertility, and aspen contributes to spiritual understanding.

MAKING CAKE

Ever since the 1600s, people have been taking their yule log celebrations out of the fireplace and onto the table with cakes made to look like yule logs. Chefs through the centuries have developed myriad recipes for these round cakes and decorated them to look like logs adorned with leaves, pine cones and mushrooms.

Three Kings Day

You don't have to stop celebrating Christmas on Dec. 25 — and many people around the world don't.

In several communities and countries, especially Spanish-speaking ones, Three Kings Day is as big of a celebration as Christmas.

Celebrated on Jan. 6, traditionally known as the 12th Day of Christmas, it marks the arrival of the three kings or magi referred to in the book of Matthew. They followed a star and brought gifts to the infant Christ child, according to the gospel writer. It's a day marked with gift-giving, parades and special cakes.

Three Kings Day has many different names, including "Little Christmas," "Theophany," and "The Baptism of Jesus."

GIVING GIFTS

Just as the three kings were said to have brought gifts to the infant Jesus, so people celebrating Three Kings Days will give gifts — especially to children. In some countries, children are told to leave their shoes outside their door for the kings to fill them up with presents.

Like the tradition of feeding Santa's reindeer, children celebrating Three Kings Day will fill shoeboxes with bunches of grass or hay for the camels that bear the kings on their backs and are bringing them presents.



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PARADES

Communities around the world will have Three Kings Days parades.

The largest one in the world takes place on Jan. 5 in Barcelona, Spain. According to the official Barcelona City website, the Three Kings arrive by sea and are welcomed by the mayor. The mayor bestows upon them the key to the city so that they can get into all the

homes in Barcelona and leave presents. The Three Kings lead a parade through the city streets followed by floats, dancers, royal pages, artists and anyone else who wants to take part.

Another parade that dates back 40 years occurs in New York, El Museo del Barrio's parade. It honors New York's immigrant and migrant communities. The parade features

live camels, puppets, music and dancing.

FOOD TRADITIONS

What is a holiday without food? Three Kings' Bread is the traditional food for many people on this holiday and it has different names and ingredients. The "cake of the kings" is sometimes called "rosca de reyes" or "galette des rois." In the latter, which is a French

tradition, a coin, a jewel, a toy or a doll is hidden in the cake and the child who finds it gets to wear a special crown.

The bread, according to Velas Magazine article in January 2022, is made of sweet dough in the shape of an oval. Every family has its own secret recipe and traditional way of spicing it, but it often includes crystallized fruits, quince jam and a sugary paste.

Ukrainian Christmas

This past year, the Ukraine was thrust into the news when Russia invaded. It sparked an interest among many about Ukraine's culture.

Ukrainians have very elaborate Christmas celebrations which start on the Greek Orthodox Christmas Eve — Jan. 6 — and run for 12 days, ending on Epiphany. The main celebrations involve a 12-course meal, caroling and puppet shows.

CHRISTMAS EVE FEAST

According to Ukrainian People, a Ukrainian-American magazine, families gather after the first star of the night appears. Two tablecloths cover the table, one symbolizing the family's ancestors, the other the living members of the family. Hay is spread under the table and the tablecloths and an extra place-setting is left out for the spirits of family members who have died.

Ukraine has been called the bread basket of the world and wheat plays an important part of the meal. The Christmas bread — kolach — owns the center of the table, braided into three rings representing the Trinity. A sheaf of wheat stalks called a *didukh* is ceremoniously placed under the icons in the house. The head of the household places a



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bowl of boiled wheat mixed with poppy seeds and honey next to it. It is called *kutia* or God's Food. Next up is God's Drink, which is made with 12 different stewed fruits.

The head of the family gives each person at the table a piece of bread dipped in honey. After a prayer and greeting, the 12-course meal begins, each course representing one of the 12 Apostles. There is no meat served as Ukrainians fast until Christmas Day.

Some courses include *kutia*, *borshch*, boiled dumplings, a

variety of fish, and stuffed cabbage.

CAROLING

Ukrainian Christmas caroling is far more elaborate than that typically practiced in the United States. According to Ukrainian People, caroling was more of a folk opera with carolers taking on roles as song leader, a goat, a bag carrier and a carrier of the six-pointed Star of Bethlehem. Others might play such instruments as the violin, dulcimer or the *trembita*.

When given permission to sing, carolers enter the house

and sing a carol for each member of the family. Traditionally they'll perform a comedic skit involving the goat and perhaps dance and recite poetry

PUPPET SHOWS

Ukrainian puppet shows, known as *vertrep*, are centuries old, but under Soviet rule they were persecuted and died out. According to the Internet Encyclopedia of Ukraine, the tradition has resurged this century.

Performers carry the two-story stage from house to house and put on two-act shows. The

first act is religious in nature, recreating nativity scenes, singing hymns and telling Christmas-related stories, especially that of Herod and the revenge mothers of the children he murdered took.

The second act strings together several comic scenes. One of the main characters in the second-act strings is a figure known as *Kozak* who is based on a Ukrainian folk hero. He has a monologue extolling the glorious past of Ukraine and he is looked upon as the eternal defender of Ukraine's freedom.

Ugly Holiday Sweaters

Ugly may be in the eye of the beholder, but since the turn of the century, more people are embracing the kitsch and dubious fashion of ugly holiday sweaters.

What constitutes an ugly holiday sweater? The definitions vary, though the authors of “Ugly Christmas Sweater Party Book: The Definitive Guide to Getting Your Ugly On,” offer up a wide array of pictures that include just about any sweater that is a bit kitschy, a bit campy and might come with 3D snowballs or bells.

HISTORY

Holiday sweaters first became popular in the 1950s, but subsequent generations found them embarrassing and one of those dreaded gifts that got hid away in the closet. Then, after making a few heart-warming appearances in movies, they started to make a comeback.

They're pretty easy to find, as the contemporary holiday tradition means that holiday sweaters — of any degree of ugliness — will sell like hot cakes. You can find them in your local yarn shop, any local clothier or stores that offer items from major retailers. They all have their own version of the ugly sweater. Some of them aren't even ugly!



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You can also go the DIY route. Head to your local craft store or hardware store and pick up a glue gun, LED lights, non-breakable ornaments, tinsel, garland or anything else you can think of that you can attach to a sweater in a knock-out fashion.

UGLY SWEATER PARTY

It's also become a popular theme for holiday parties. According to the book “The Ugly Christmas Sweater Rebellion,” the authors were

the creators of the first Ugly Christmas Sweater Party, ones that were done as festive fundraisers for such causes as cancer or Make a Wish Foundation. Ever since 2002, their parties encouraged everyone to wear the cheesiest, most festive sweaters they could find.

They then mixed in caroling, tree decorating, eggnog chugging, live music and milk and cookies. Those are just the start of the ideas you can use for your Ugly Sweater Party.

The Ugly Sweater Party features games and contests judging the sweaters in such categories as:

- Most likely to make Santa blush.
- Funniest ugly sweater.
- Most creative ugly sweater.
- Most likely to go viral on social media.
- Most original.
- Best couple combo.
- Tackiest sweater.

Want more ideas? Head over to Pinterest and search for ugly holiday sweater parties and you

can find printables for ballots, invitations and a plethora of games and recipes.

Consider having a box of spare sweaters by the door in case a guest shows up not wearing one. Or, make the whole party a DIY one. Set out tables with holiday items and give people a set amount of time to create their own sweaters. Then invite everyone to a photo booth where they can get a picture taken with their ugly sweater and any holiday props you might have available.