

Explaining festivals and celebrations

Choose a festival/ celebration from below. Explain it in as much detail as you can so that a foreign person who doesn't know much about your country would understand. Your partner will just listen. When you finish, your partner will add anything that you missed, add more details, correct anything that you said wrong and/ or ask questions. You can also ask them to do that with questions like "Did I miss anything?"/ "Is there anything else I should say?" Switch roles and do the same with other things below until your teacher stops you.

Suggested questions to ask about a festival or celebration

Are there any special superstitions/ special foods/ special clothes/...?

Do people (still)...?

How often...?

In your town/ area/ region/ prefecture/ ward/ county/ state/ country/.....?

Is it true that...?

What do people eat/ do/ wear/...?

What do people use... for?

What does... mean?

What happens...?

What is (a)...?

What is special about...?

What is... called?

What is... made from?

What kind of food...?

What's the difference between... and...?

When do people...?

Who do people do...?

Why do people...?

Ask about anything above which you couldn't think of how to explain (well), working together as a whole class to explain that thing each time.

Japanese Xmas and New Year vocabulary	British and American Xmas and New Year vocabulary
amazake bounenkai daruma dondo-yaki ekiden fukubukuro fukuwarai hakama hanetsuki/ hago-ita hatsumode joya-no-kane kadomatsu karuta kazunoko kimono konbu kouhaku uta-gassen kurikinton kuro-mame mochi mochi-tsuki nenga-jo omikuji o-sechi-ryori o-shiruko o-toshi-dama (o-)toso o-zoni saru-doshi shichi-fuku-jin strawberry "short cake" sugoroku tai takenoko toshi-koshi-soba	advent calendar Auld Lang Syne baubles brandy sauce bread sauce Brussel sprouts candlelit service (Xmas) carol chestnuts chocolate coins Christmas crackers cranberry sauce custard date eggnog fairy lights fig goose gravy holly marzipan midnight mass mistletoe mulled wine nativity (scene) nut roast nutcrackers office party parsnip raisin roast stuffing sugared almonds The Queen's speech tinsel turkey walnuts winter ale wreath Xmas log Xmas pudding Xmas tree

- Dezome-shiki
- enkai/ nomikai
- “Golden Week”
- hanami
- hina matsuri
- Japanese Valentine’s Day/ “White Day”
- Japanese-style wedding
- kanreki
- kodomo-no-hi
- natsu matsuri (e.g. Gion matsuri)
- nyugaku-shiki
- o-bon
- Pocky Day
- Sapporo yuki matsuri
- seijin no hi
- setsubun
- shichigosan
- sotsuen-shiki
- tanabata

Things related to festivals/ celebrations

- (aka)-chochin
- bento
- bon-odori
- butsudan/ kamidana
- chimaki
- chirashizushi
- chitose-ame
- e-ma
- furisode
- giri choco
- gomokuzushi
- jimbei
- kakigori
- kingyo-sukui
- koi nobori
- koma
- mikoshi
- nebuta
- nihonshu
- san-san-kudo
- taiko
- tako-yaki
- teru-teru-bozu
- tsunokakushi
- yaki-soba
- yukata

Other festivals and celebrations

- All Saints Day/ (Mexican) Day of the Dead
- April Fool’s Day
- Armistice Day/ Remembrance Day/ War Memorial Day/ Poppy Day
- Bonfire Night/ Guy Fawkes Night
- Buddhist festivals
- Carnival/ Mardi Gras/ Pancake Day
- Chinese New Year/Lunar New Year
- Constitution Day/ Independence Day
- Diwali
- Easter (Good Friday etc)/ Semana Santa
- Eid (ul Fitr)
- Emperor’s birthday/ King’s birthday/ Queen’s birthday
- Gay Pride
- Halloween
- Hanukkah
- Holi
- Lent
- May Day
- Mother’s Day
- National holidays/ Bank holidays
- Oktoberfest
- Ramadan
- Running of the Bulls
- Saint Patrick’s Day
- Shrove Tuesday/ Pancake Day
- Teacher’s Day
- Thanksgiving
- Tomato Throwing Festival
- Valentine’s Day

Try to identify which Japanese festival or celebration, or thing related to one, is being described on each line below.

1. It's a ceremony to mark the first day of school.
2. It's a cherry blossom viewing party. People usually have a picnic, eating Japanese lunchboxes and drinking rice wine under the cherry blossom trees.
3. It's a doll's festival. Old-fashioned dolls are displayed in the house.
4. It's a Japanese lunchbox.
5. It's a kind of household shrine, usually with photos of your ancestors. You leave offerings of food and light joss sticks and candles there.
6. It's a kind of Japanese carp flag, streamer or kite. It is flown on Children's Day. The fish looks like it is swimming upstream, which means boys should persevere and not give up. Traditionally families have one for each boy in the family.
7. It's a kind of light, summer kimono, like a dressing gown. It's popular in hotels, hot springs and summer festivals.
8. It's a kind of television singing competition, where the men and women are in different teams. It's traditional New Year television.
9. It's a New Year postcard. It's sent out to many people who you know, similar to Christmas cards.
10. It's a portable shrine, usually carried through the streets during summer festivals.
11. It's coming of age day, which marks when young people become adults. The young people dress up smartly, often in traditional clothes, and have a ceremony at the town hall/ city hall.
12. It's food eaten at New Year, often because it is lucky or has a lucky name.
13. It's fried noodles, often sold at street stalls during summer festivals.
14. It's shaved ice with sweet toppings, usually eaten at summer festivals.
15. It's the first time when people go to a temple or shrine to pray in the New Year. People sometimes burn arrows to take away bad luck.
16. It's the year of the monkey, which is one of the twelve years in the Chinese horoscope.
17. It's the time when the spirits of your ancestors are supposed to come and visit, a bit like Halloween. People usually clean their ancestors' graves.
18. People throw dried beans in their house to take away bad luck. Sometimes someone dresses up as a devil and people throw their beans at the devil. People are also supposed to eat one bean for each year of their lives.
19. The direct translation is "sweet rice wine", but it isn't alcoholic.
20. The literal translation is "forget the year party". It's held at the end of the year, often with colleagues.
21. Three-year-old, five-year-old and seven-year-old children dress up, usually in traditional clothes, and go to a temple to be blessed.
22. It's a kind of chewy, very filling rice cake, made from sticky rice.
23. It's a Japanese drum, often a very large one.
24. It's a traditional spinning top, spun with a piece of string.
25. It's an envelope of money, given as a gift at New Year.
26. It's a piece of paper which tells you your fortune for the coming year.
27. It's sometimes translated as "drinking party", but it's more like just going out for drinks.
28. It's a period in late spring with many public holidays near each other.
29. Similar to a few other countries like South Korea, on this day Japanese men give gifts, preferably of higher value, to women who they received Valentine chocolates from.

Suggested answers

1. nyugakushiki
2. hanami
3. hinamatsuri
4. bento
5. butsudan/ kamidana
6. koi-nobori
7. yukata
8. kouhaku uta-gassen
9. nengajo
10. mikoshi
11. seijin-no-hi
12. sechi-ryori
13. yaki soba
14. kakigori
15. hatsumode
16. sarudoshi
17. o-bon
18. setsubun
19. amazake
20. bounenkai
21. shichigosan
22. mochi
23. taiko
24. koma
25. toshidama
26. o-mikuji
27. nomi-kai
28. "Golden Week"
29. "White Day"

Without looking above, work together to describe all of the things above. There are many different ways of explaining each thing.

Underline useful language for describing festivals and celebrations and things associated with them in the descriptions above. Not every sentence has useful language to underline, and some have more than one useful thing to underline. Then brainstorm more generally useful language for this purpose.

Compare your ideas with the list below. Ask about anything you couldn't use or understand, making a statement using it each time.

1. It's a ceremony to mark the first day of school. – nyugakushiki
2. It's a cherry blossom viewing party. People usually have a picnic, eating Japanese lunchboxes and drinking rice wine under the cherry blossom trees. – hanami
3. It's a doll's festival. Old-fashioned dolls are displayed in the house. – hinamatsuri
4. It's a Japanese lunchbox. – bento
5. It's a kind of household shrine, usually with photos of your ancestors. You leave offerings of food and light joss sticks and candles there. – butsudan/ kamidana
6. It's a kind of Japanese carp flag, streamer or kite. It is flown on Children's Day. The fish looks like it is swimming upstream, which means boys should persevere and not give up. Traditionally families have one for each boy in the family. – koi-nobori
7. It's a kind of light, summer kimono, like a dressing gown. It's popular in hotels, hot springs and summer festivals. – yukata
8. It's a kind of television singing competition, where the men and women are in different teams. It's traditional New Year television. – kouhaku uta-gassen
9. It's a New Year postcard. It's sent out to many people who you know, similar to Christmas cards. – nengajo
10. It's a portable shrine, usually carried through the streets during summer festivals. – mikoshi
11. It's coming of age day, which marks when young people become adults. The young people dress up smartly, often in traditional clothes, and have a ceremony at the town hall/ city hall. – seijin-no-hi
12. It's food eaten at New Year, often because it is lucky or has a lucky name. – sechi-ryori
13. It's fried noodles, often sold at street stalls during summer festivals. – yaki soba
14. It's shaved ice with sweet toppings, usually eaten at summer festivals. – kakigori
15. It's the first time when people go to a temple or shrine to pray in the New Year. People sometimes burn arrows to take away bad luck. – hatsumode
16. It's the year of the monkey, which is one of the twelve years in the Chinese horoscope. – sarudoshi
17. It's the time when the spirits of your ancestors are supposed to come and visit, a bit like Halloween. People usually clean their ancestors' graves. – o-bon
18. People throw dried beans in their house to take away bad luck. Sometimes someone dresses up as a devil and people throw their beans at the devil. People are also supposed to eat one bean for each year of their lives. – setsubun
19. The direct translation is "sweet rice wine", but it isn't alcoholic. – amazake
20. The literal translation is "forget the year party". It's held at the end of the year, often with colleagues. – bounenkai
21. Three-year-old, five-year-old and seven-year-old children dress up, usually in traditional clothes, and go to a temple to be blessed. – shichigosan
22. It's a kind of chewy, very filling rice cake, made from sticky rice. – mochi
23. It's a Japanese drum, often a very large one. – taiko
24. It's a traditional spinning top, spun with a piece of string. – koma
25. It's an envelope of money, given as a gift at New Year. – toshidama
26. It's a piece of paper which tells you your fortune for the coming year. – o-mikuji
27. It's sometimes translated as "drinking party", but it's more like just going out for drinks.
28. It's a period in late spring with many public holidays near each other.
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Useful language for describing festivals and celebrations

Use similar words to describe other festivals and celebrations, e.g. those in other countries, e.g. British traditions or Chinese festivals.

- ancestors
- bad luck
- bamboo
- (formal) banquet
- blessing
- blossom
- to bow
- bride
- burn/ light
- buy
- candles
- candy/ sweets
- card/ postcard
- carp
- ceremony
- chewy rice cake
- Chinese horoscope/ Chinese astrology
- colleagues/ co-workers
- coming of age
- cream cake
- decorate/ decoration
- devil/ demon
- display
- dress up
- extended family
- fireworks/ sparklers
- flag
- flowers
- gift/ present
- give a speech
- good luck
- grave
- groom
- holiday/ public holiday
- household shrine
- joss sticks
- lucky charm
- lucky food
- kite
- made from/ made of
- mandarin/ satsuma/ tangerine
- mask
- myth
- New Year's Day/ New Year's Eve
- offering

- office party
- official...
- party
- party poppers
- picnic
- pine needles
- portable shrine
- pray
- public holiday/ national holiday
- raise a toast
- religious...
- replace
- (Japanese) rice wine
- romantic
- share
- shrine
- special dish
- spirits/ ghosts
- spring cleaning
- stay up
- street food
- stall/ street stall
- superstition
- (Buddhist) temple
- traditional clothes/ traditional footwear
- traditional game/ traditional sport
- traditional music
- visit
- watch
- wear
- wedding reception
- wish for

Useful phrases for giving translations and explaining meanings

- The direct (= literal) translation is.../ Translated word for word it would be...
- The normal (= usual) translation for this is...
- Although there's no obvious translation, it could be explained as...
- It can be translated as...
- In Japan we say this when (we are talking about)...
- This is often explained as...
- This means (something like)...

Useful phrases for comparing different countries

- It has something in common with... but...
- It's a bit like/ something like (the British/ American/ Chinese/ Korean/...) but...
- It's similar to... in (*name of country*).
- This also exists in China/ Korea/ most Asian countries/...
- This only exists in Japan (and a couple of other countries) and is...