NEWS SPOTLIGHT | CULTURE AND HISTORY

What are Rituals and Traditions and Why Humans Need Them

Name _____ Date _____

Each December, Christmas, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, and many other celebrations fill the calendar, and each one comes with actions that people repeat year after year. Archaeologist Michelle Langley explains the difference between a tradition and a ritual, how researchers find the oldest traces of rituals, and why people have needed them for so long.

As you read, ask yourself

- **What is the difference between a tradition and a ritual?**

- **What clues can archaeologists use when rituals leave almost no physical traces?**

- **What reasons does the author give for why humans have rituals?**

Reading tip. Read the article once for the big ideas. Then read it again with a pencil and mark the three reasons the author gives for why we have rituals.

Word hunt

Read each meaning. Then find the word in the article. Check the box when you find it.

Big ideas		
☐	**Tradition**	A custom or belief passed down from one generation to the next.
☐	**Ritual**	A set of actions done in a set order, often as part of a larger belief system such as religion or philosophy.
☐	**Symbolic**	Standing for an idea or meaning beyond what a thing is on its own, like a color that stands for a belief.
☐	**Ceremony**	A formal event held to mark something important, often with set actions.
☐	**Milestone**	An important moment in a life, such as a birth, a graduation, or a wedding.

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month.thence.us/rituals-and-traditions-why-humans-need-them

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Digging into the past	
☐ **Archaeologist**	A scientist who studies the human past by examining objects, buildings, and other traces that people left behind.
☐ **Evidence**	Facts or objects that help show whether an idea is true.
☐ **Pigment**	A material that gives color to something, such as the red paint used on bodies, objects, and rock walls.
☐ **Neanderthal**	A kind of early human relative that lived long ago and is now extinct.
☐ **Orally**	By speaking instead of writing. A story passed down orally is told aloud from person to person.

People and communities	
☐ **Anxiety**	A feeling of worry or unease about what might happen.
☐ **Crisis**	A time of great danger or difficulty.
☐ **Ancestors**	Family members and other people from long ago whom a person or group descends from.
☐ **Community**	A group of people who live near each other or share something important, such as a place or a belief.
☐ **Resources**	Useful supplies, such as food and materials, that people need to live.

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Rituals have been crucial for humans throughout history – and we still need them

Michelle Langley, *Griffith University*

Each December, Christmas, Hanukkah and Kwanzaa, among others, take over our thoughts and our wallets as we participate in ceremonies our ancestors have practised for as long as we can remember. These are all example of traditions. And in most cases, traditions are accompanied by rituals.

What's the difference?

In scientific terms, a "tradition" refers to the passing down of customs and beliefs from one generation to the next. A "ritual", on the other hand, is a series of actions performed according to a prescribed order, and which is often embedded in a larger symbolic system, such as religion or philosophy.

For example, while celebrating birthdays is a tradition, blowing out the candles on a cake is a ritual. Similarly, while getting married is a tradition, exchanging vows is a ritual.

New rituals can be created at any time. To become tradition they only need to be understood and replicated by a wider community.

Photo: Communities around the world have different rituals practised during weddings, often passed down through generations. (Shutterstock)

And it's not just in grand gestures that humans practise rituals; some are so embedded into our everyday lives we no longer recognise them. The very particular way someone makes their tea or coffee in the morning is a ritual they enact daily.

Basically, rituals are everywhere. That raises the question: why do we have them at all?

Archaeological evidence for the earliest rituals

Ritual behaviour has very deep origins in humanity. However, tracking these origins and their development is difficult as rituals often leave little or no physical traces behind for archaeologists to find.

Thus far, the best evidence for ancient rituals is the deliberate burial of loved ones. The oldest example is found at Mt Carmel in Israel, where some 130,000 years ago a Neanderthal woman was laid to rest by her community.

Archaeologists also suggest the extensive use of coloured pigments (particularly bright red) to paint bodies, objects and rock walls points to the practice of "symbolic" behaviour, including ritual. The oldest reliable evidence for colourant use dates to between 500,000 and 310,000 years ago and comes from several archaeological sites in southern Africa.

Another type of evidence that is often intrinsically tied to rituals and traditions is musical instruments. Bone flutes dating back to about 42,000 years ago have been found in Western Europe. How long people have used the very first instruments – the human voice, clapping hands and stomping feet – remains unknown.

Why do we have rituals?

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Rituals play a very important role in human communities for a number of reasons.

First, rituals help reduce individual and collective anxieties, especially when we ourselves, our family, or our whole community is facing uncertain times or crisis.

Research has shown that by praying or singing together we feel connected and supported and our anxiety is reduced. This may explain why Parisians were moved to sing together as they watched their beloved Notre Dame Cathedral burn in 2019.

Video: Parisians sing together as Notre Dame burns – a spontaneous ritual to deal with an unexpected crisis.

Rituals also help reduce anxiety by allowing us to feel control over our surroundings. For instance, new parents may be anxious about protecting their baby. Rituals that welcome the infant into the family and community help them feel they've done everything possible – including drawing on supernatural protection – to ensure their child's wellbeing.

Second, rituals bring people together to celebrate or otherwise mark important life milestones. Births, graduations, marriages and deaths are all marked by rituals and traditions across the globe. These events provide a time and place to gather and encourage people to renew their bonds with friends and family.

These bonds are especially important in times of bad luck, which helps explain why the incentive to maintain them has endured through human history.

Imagine living tens of thousands of years ago, when human communities were much smaller and often lived farther apart. If a volcano erupted, the resulting destruction could mean plant and animal resources – essential food and materials needed for survival – would not be available for months, or perhaps years.

You would then have to rely on the bonds you maintained with neighbouring communities through shared rituals. Such bonds would encourage the sharing of resources until circumstances improve.

Finally, rituals help us remember and share huge amounts of cultural information. By learning a format or pattern of behaviour through ritual, we can absorb information and recall it later more easily.

This approach works astonishingly well to ensure information is passed down orally over long periods. Thus far, the oldest story dated using scientific methods is the Aboriginal Gunditjmara people's story of the Budj Bim volcano eruption, which occurred 37,000 years ago in what is now south-western Victoria.

Being able to retain information about changes in the landscape, its plants, animals and people ultimately increased the likelihood that your family would not only survive – but thrive.

Rituals will remain

Without rituals, and the traditions in which they become embedded, it is unlikely humanity would have advanced to its current state of cultural and technological development.

We wouldn't have been able to continually gather and share information, maintain bonds over extensive geographical areas, or make it through difficult periods.

Despite being surrounding by increasingly complex technologies, rituals today remain more important than ever. With extreme weather events and conflicts continuing to displace people all over the globe, they will act

as an essential social glue that holds our communities together.

Michelle Langley, Associate Professor of Archaeology, *Griffith University*

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Spelling detective

You may notice the Australian English spellings. Which words change? The article is reprinted unchanged, so the words stay as the author wrote them. Write the American spelling for each word, then say what changed.

Patterns to look for: -our becomes -or, and -ise becomes -ize. The word “archaeologist” is not on this list, because that spelling is also standard in American English.

In the article	Where it appears	American spelling	What changed?
practised	“ancestors have practised”		
practise	“humans practise rituals”		
recognise	“no longer recognise them”		
coloured	“coloured pigments”		
colourant	“colourant use”		
behaviour	“Ritual behaviour”		
neighbouring	“neighbouring communities”		
wellbeing	“child’s wellbeing”		
south-western	“south-western Victoria”		
Mt	“Mt Carmel”		

Bonus. Choose one word from the list. Write a sentence of your own using the American spelling.

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Clues across time

The author points to several kinds of evidence. Here they are in order, from oldest to newest, as the article reports them. Dates are approximate.

When	Clue	What the article says
500,000 to 310,000 years ago	Pigments	Archaeologists suggest that extensive use of coloured pigments, especially bright red, on bodies, objects, and rock walls points to symbolic behaviour, including ritual. The oldest reliable evidence comes from several sites in southern Africa.
About 130,000 years ago	Burial	At Mt Carmel in Israel, a Neanderthal woman was laid to rest by her community. The author calls deliberate burial the best evidence for ancient rituals.
About 42,000 years ago	Music	Bone flutes this old have been found in Western Europe. The author says instruments are often tied to rituals and traditions, but the first instruments, such as the human voice, clapping, and stomping, cannot be dated.
About 37,000 years ago	Oral story	The Budj Bim volcano erupted in what is now south-western Victoria. The Gunditjmara people's story of the eruption is the oldest story the author knows of that has been dated using scientific methods.
2019	Ritual today	Parisians sang together as Notre Dame Cathedral burned. The author describes it as a spontaneous ritual used to deal with an unexpected crisis.

Test yourself: match the date

Cover the When column in the table. Then use the date bank to write the date that goes with each clue. Check your answers against the table.

Pigments _____

Burial _____

Music _____

Oral story _____

Ritual today _____

Date bank
- 2019
- About 42,000 years ago
- 500,000 to 310,000 years ago
- About 37,000 years ago
- About 130,000 years ago

Think about it

Pigments. Why might red paint on a rock wall be a weaker clue than a burial?

Burial. What can researchers learn from a burial that they cannot learn from paint?

Music. Which instruments in the article would never be found by an archaeologist, and why?

Oral story. How does a story about a volcano help a community that lives near volcanoes?

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Ritual today. Can you think of a time a group of people has come together in a similar way, in the news or in a story?

Big question. Which of these clues would stay in the ground for thousands of years, and which would disappear? What does that tell you about why rituals are hard to study?

Discussion questions

Answer each question in complete sentences. If you get stuck, use the hint under the question.

1. Use the author's definitions of tradition and ritual. Choose a tradition you know about, from your own life, a book, or a film, and name one ritual that belongs inside it.

Hint: Where to look: Reread the paragraphs with the birthday and wedding examples. A tradition is the big custom. A ritual is the set of actions inside it.
Sentence starter: A tradition I know about is ___. One ritual inside it is ___. I know it is a ritual because ___.

2. The author says rituals often leave "little or no physical traces." Why does that make them hard to study? What three kinds of evidence does she use instead?

Hint: Where to look: Look at the section called "Archaeological evidence for the earliest rituals." Each kind of evidence has its own paragraph.
Sentence starter: Rituals are hard to study because ___. Instead, the author uses ___, ___, and ___.

3. The author calls deliberate burial "the best evidence" for ancient rituals. Why might a burial tell researchers more than a pile of pigment or a flute?

Hint: Where to look: Compare the burial paragraph with the pigment and flute paragraphs. Notice the verbs the author uses: the burial is stated as a fact, while pigment "points to" ritual and instruments are "often" tied to it.
Sentence starter: A burial shows ___ because ___. Pigment or a flute could also be used for ___.

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4. List the three reasons the author gives for why humans have rituals. Put each one in your own words and give an example from the article.

Hint: Where to look: Look in the section "Why do we have rituals?" The author signals each reason with a word: First, Second, Finally.
Sentence starter: Reason one is that rituals ___. For example, ___. Reason two is ___. Reason three is ___.

5. Explain how shared rituals could help a community get through a disaster such as a volcanic eruption. Use the author's example in your answer.

Hint: Where to look: Find the paragraph that begins "Imagine living tens of thousands of years ago." Follow the chain: eruption, then lost resources, then what the community relies on.
Sentence starter: After an eruption, a community might lose ___. Because of shared rituals, neighbouring communities would ___ until ___.

6. The Budj Bim story is described as the oldest story dated using scientific methods. Why do you think the author chose it to support her point about passing down information?

Hint: Where to look: Read the paragraph on passing down information orally, then the one that follows it. Ask what the story records, and how long ago.
Sentence starter: The author chose this story because ___. It supports her point that ___.

7. The author writes that without rituals, humanity would probably not have advanced as far as it has. Is this claim fully proven by the evidence in the article? What else would you want to know?

Hint: Where to look: Find the first paragraph under "Rituals will remain." Look at the words "unlikely" and "would not have," then ask what the earlier sections actually prove.
Sentence starter: The author supports this claim with ___. However, the article does not show ___. I would want to know ___.

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8. The article ends by predicting that rituals will matter even more in the future. Do you agree? Find one sentence from the article to support your answer.

Hint: Where to look: Reread the last paragraph. Note what the author says is happening in the world and what she says rituals will do.
Sentence starter: I agree or disagree because ___. The sentence that supports my view is "___."

This piece is curated by Dr. Katherine M. Schlatter, Chief Editor and CEO of This Month™

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Teacher pages

Answer guides, the spelling list, standards connections, and notes on the article. Remove these pages before copying the packet for students.

Discussion question guides

1. Use the author's definitions of tradition and ritual. Choose a tradition you know about, from your own life, a book, or a film, and name one ritual that belongs inside it.

A strong answer pairs a broad custom (tradition) with a specific set of actions done in a set order (ritual). Accept examples from any culture, book, or film. Watch for students who name two traditions instead of a tradition and a ritual inside it.

2. The author says rituals often leave "little or no physical traces." Why does that make them hard to study? What three kinds of evidence does she use instead?

Actions and sounds do not last, so researchers need objects. The three kinds are deliberate burial, coloured pigments, and musical instruments (bone flutes). Students may add that the very first instruments, voices, clapping, and stomping, cannot be dated.

3. The author calls deliberate burial "the best evidence" for ancient rituals. Why might a burial tell researchers more than a pile of pigment or a flute?

This is open ended. Good reasoning notes that a burial involves deliberate care by a whole community, while paint and flutes could have had other uses. Reward students who notice the author's hedged wording for pigments and instruments.

4. List the three reasons the author gives for why humans have rituals. Put each one in your own words and give an example from the article.

(1) Rituals reduce anxiety, with the Notre Dame singing and new parents as examples. (2) They bring people together to mark milestones and keep bonds strong, with births, graduations, marriages, and deaths as examples. (3) They help communities remember and share cultural information, with the Budj Bim story as the example.

5. Explain how shared rituals could help a community get through a disaster such as a volcanic eruption. Use the author's example in your answer.

The article links shared rituals to bonds between neighbouring communities, and those bonds encourage sharing resources until circumstances improve. Students should show the cause-and-effect chain and not just say that rituals "help."

6. The Budj Bim story is described as the oldest story dated using scientific methods. Why do you think the author chose it to support her point about passing down information?

The story records a real landscape event, a volcanic eruption, and has been carried orally for about 37,000 years, which shows how well pattern and format can preserve knowledge. Also accept answers that stress that scientists were able to date it.

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7. The author writes that without rituals, humanity would probably not have advanced as far as it has. Is this claim fully proven by the evidence in the article? What else would you want to know?

The article gives reasons and examples, but the claim itself is reasoned and not directly tested. Strong answers separate evidence the article does give (anxiety, bonds, memory) from the larger leap to human progress, and suggest what a test of the claim might look like.

8. The article ends by predicting that rituals will matter even more in the future. Do you agree? Find one sentence from the article to support your answer.

Look for a clear position plus a quoted or closely paraphrased sentence, such as the author's idea that rituals act as "social glue." Accept disagreement as long as it is explained with reasons.

Clues across time: why each clue matters

Pigments (500,000 to 310,000 years ago). Paint is a clue that people used symbols. The article says it "points to" ritual, so it is a hint and not a full record of what people did.

Burial (About 130,000 years ago). A burial takes planning and care from a whole group of people, and it leaves physical remains that can last.

Music (About 42,000 years ago). Some of the oldest ritual tools may be missing from the record because they left nothing behind.

Oral story (About 37,000 years ago). The author uses it to show that passing information down orally, through a pattern or format, can keep knowledge alive over very long periods.

Ritual today (2019). It shows that people still turn to shared rituals when something frightening happens.

Answer key: match the date

Pigments = 500,000 to 310,000 years ago; **Burial** = About 130,000 years ago; **Music** = About 42,000 years ago; **Oral story** = About 37,000 years ago; **Ritual today** = 2019

Spelling in this article

The author is Australian, so the article uses Australian English spellings. Because the article is republished unchanged, the spellings stay as written.

In the article	American English	Why it changes
practised	**practiced**	-ised becomes -iced. Americans use "practice" for both the noun and the verb.
practise	**practice**	Australian English uses "practise" for the verb and "practice" for the noun. American English uses "practice" for both.
recognise	**recognize**	-ise becomes -ize.
coloured	**colored**	-our becomes -or.
colourant	**colorant**	-our becomes -or.
behaviour	**behavior**	-our becomes -or. It appears three times in the article.
neighbouring	**neighboring**	-our becomes -or.

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In the article	American English	Why it changes
wellbeing	**well-being**	Americans usually write this with a hyphen.
south-western	**southwestern**	Americans usually write compass directions as one word.
Mt	**Mt.**	Americans usually add a period to the abbreviation, or write out “Mount.”

Standards connections

Georgia standards

Codes: 6-8.L.V.3.b, K-12.P.EICC.3.f, 6-8.T.T.2.a, 6.T.C.2.b, 7.T.C.2.b, K-12.P.CP.1.d

Georgia’s K-12 ELA Standards, approved in 2023. The codes use the state’s newer format, which looks different from the older ELAGSE codes.

6-8.L.V.3.b, word hunt. Students use context clues to work out the meaning of unfamiliar words as they read.

K-12.P.EICC.3.f, questions 2 to 5 and 8. Students make inferences and support them with the text.

6-8.T.T.2.a, “As you read,” question 4, and the timeline. Students identify main ideas and key details in an expository text. Grade 7 asks for analysis of these techniques, and grade 8 asks for analysis of how they develop.

6.T.C.2.b and 7.T.C.2.b, question 7. Students look at how an author’s choice of evidence affects credibility. Grade 8 (8.T.C.2.b) focuses on author bias, so an eighth grade teacher might add: what might the author’s background as an archaeologist lead her to emphasize?

K-12.P.CP.1.d, discussion questions. Students investigate questions and explore texts together in pairs or small groups.

Check the codes against your district’s pacing guide before listing them for a class.

North Carolina standards

Codes: RI.6-8.1, RI.6-8.2, RI.6-8.4, RI.6-8.8, SL.6-8.1

North Carolina’s 2017 Standard Course of Study, in use through the 2026-27 school year. The 2026 standards begin in 2027-28, and the codes will change then. Other states that follow the Common Core use the same RI and SL codes.

RI.6-8.1, questions 2 to 5 and 8. Students cite textual evidence to support what the text says and inferences drawn from it.

RI.6-8.2, “As you read” and question 4. Students determine a central idea and how details convey it, and summarize without personal opinion.

RI.6-8.4, word hunt. Students determine the meaning of words and phrases as used in the text.

RI.6-8.8, question 7. Students evaluate claims and decide whether they are supported by reasons and evidence. Grade 7 and 8 wording adds judging whether the reasoning is sound and the evidence relevant and sufficient.

SL.6-8.1, discussion questions. Students take part in collaborative discussions and refer to evidence from the text.

The grade 6 wording was checked against the state’s published standards. Check the grade 7 and 8 wording before you list those grades.

Texas standards

Codes: 5F, 6C, 6D, 2B, 8D, 1D, 6J (grade 8)

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Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills for English Language Arts and Reading, adopted in 2017 (grade 6, §110.22; grade 7, §110.23; grade 8, §110.24). These are still the current standards for these grades. Each code gives the strand number and the letter, so 5F is strand 5, item F, in every grade.

5F, questions 2 to 5 and 8. Students make inferences and use evidence to support understanding.

6C, every "find a sentence" prompt. Students use text evidence to support a response.

6D, "As you read" and question 4. Students paraphrase and summarize in ways that keep the meaning and order.

2B, word hunt. Students use context to clarify the meaning of words. The kind of context named changes by grade: definition, analogy and examples in grade 6, contrast or cause and effect in grade 7, and context within or beyond a paragraph in grade 8.

8D, headings and structure. Students recognize the controlling idea and the organizational patterns of an informational text. The article defines its key terms and then sorts reasons under headings.

1D, discussion questions. Students take part in discussion. The wording differs by grade: student-led discussion in grade 6, constructive feedback in grade 7, and collaborative discussion with goals in grade 8.

6J, grade 8 only, questions 7 and 8. Students defend or challenge an author's claims using relevant text evidence.

Check the codes against your district's scope and sequence before listing them for a class.

Notes on the article

• Published in December 2022. The article is timed to the winter holidays. The research it links to is from before then.

• Claims worth checking. The article states dates for the oldest burial, the oldest pigment use, the oldest flutes, and the oldest dated story. Researchers continue to study and debate such "oldest" claims, so you may want to present these as the author's report of current evidence and invite students to look for newer sources.

• Religion and belief. The article mentions prayer, religion, and supernatural protection. It treats them as examples of how rituals work, and the discussion questions can be answered in the same descriptive way.

• Personal examples. Question 1 lets students choose an example from any source so no one has to share family details.

Ways to use this packet

• Before reading. Do the word hunt as a class or in pairs, then read the "As you read" questions aloud.

• During reading. Read one section at a time. After each heading, pause and ask for the main point in one sentence.

• After reading. Use the timeline to review the evidence, then assign two or three discussion questions for small groups or written responses.

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