

RETHINKING THANKSGIVING CELEBRATIONS

Native Perspectives on Thanksgiving

For many students, Thanksgiving is a time to express gratitude and be with family. Teachers often include fun activities related to the holiday in their classrooms. When teaching about Thanksgiving, it is important not to misrepresent Native American cultures. Native traditions have developed over thousands of years and are distinct and complex. They are also specific to each individual tribe. Projects and crafts that attempt to adapt or copy Native traditions tend to perpetuate stereotypes of Native Americans. For example, we discourage adopting “Native” costumes into your classroom. Instead, incorporate Native knowledge into your lesson plans with the provided resources below. We encourage you to celebrate the vibrancy of Native cultures through Native American art, literature, and foods while you celebrate Thanksgiving.

Native perspectives are especially important to include when teaching the history of the “First Thanksgiving.” Giving thanks is a longstanding and central tradition among most Native groups that is still practiced today. The First Thanksgiving is often portrayed as a friendly harvest festival where Pilgrims and generic, nameless “Indians” came together to eat and give thanks. In reality, the assembly of the Wampanoag Peoples and the English settlers in 1621 had much more to do with political alliances, diplomacy, and a pursuit of peace.

The Wampanoag Peoples had a long political history dealing with other Native Nations before the English arrived. The Wampanoag shared their land, food, and knowledge of the environment with the English. Without help from the Wampanoag, the English would not have had the successful harvest that led to the First Thanksgiving. However, cooperation was short lived, as the English continued to attack and encroach upon Wampanoag lands in spite of their agreements. [Interactions with Europeans and Americans brought accelerated and often devastating changes to American Indian cultures.](#) As with all lessons that discuss Native American culture and history, it is important to include accurate details, be tribally specific, and practice cultural sensitivity when teaching about Thanksgiving. Just as they were before the English arrived, Native Americans like the Wampanoag Peoples are dynamic and active participants in all aspects of society.



“Thanksgiving Address,” Mohawk quilt created by Salli M. Benedict (Kawennotakie) and Florence Katsitsienhawi Benedict, Hogansburg, New York, 2007. [NMAI, 26/4014](#)

Try these culturally sensitive activities and lessons:

- Read and discuss the [Haudenosaunee Thanksgiving Address](#) with your students. This expression of gratitude is recited by Haudenosaunee people at community gatherings throughout the year.
- Use the NMAI’s resource [“Harvest Ceremony: Beyond the Thanksgiving Myth”](#) to learn about the true history behind the historic event.
- For grades 4–8, see the NMAI teaching poster [“American Indian Perspectives on Thanksgiving.”](#)
- For younger students, follow [this Smithsonian activity](#) to make beaded corn necklaces and learn about the importance of corn.
- See [the website for Plimoth Patuxet](#) for activities about what *really* happened at the famous 1621 celebration.
- For grades 3–5, the [Abbe Museum](#), a Smithsonian Affiliate museum of Wabanaki history, art, and culture, also has helpful resources, including a lesson plan on Thanksgiving and Thanksgiving quiz cards.
- For grades 6–12, [this activity from Teaching Tolerance](#) has students read and analyze two texts about Thanksgiving written by Native authors.