

# Cinco de Mayo: What It Actually Commemorates

**Bloom's Level:** Understand

**Standard:**

NCSS.I.2 — Cultural Contributions

NCSS.THEME.II — Time, Continuity, and Change

TEKS §113.20(b)(15)(A) — Identify Historical Significance

STUDENT EDITION



The Battle of Puebla on May 5, 1862, was a surprising victory for the Mexican army against the much larger and better-equipped French forces.

## Cinco de Mayo: What It Actually Commemorates

### A Holiday Full of Misconceptions

Picture this: it's May 5th, and restaurants are decorated with colorful banners, people are wearing sombreros, and everyone seems to be celebrating Mexico. But if you asked most people why they're celebrating, many would give you the wrong answer. A large number of Americans believe Cinco de Mayo is Mexican Independence Day. It isn't — not even close. So what is it, really? Understanding the true story behind this holiday is a perfect example of why historical literacy matters just as much as cultural celebration.



The Battle of Puebla on May 5, 1862, was a surprising victory for the Mexican army against the much larger and better-equipped French forces.

### The Real Story: The Battle of Puebla

To understand Cinco de Mayo, we need to travel back to 1862 — a time when Mexico was in serious financial trouble. The country had borrowed money from several European nations and could no longer make its payments. France, under Emperor Napoleon III, used this as an excuse to invade Mexico and establish a French empire in the Americas.

On May 5, 1862, French forces — considered one of the most powerful armies in the world at the time — marched toward the city of Puebla, Mexico. They expected an easy victory. What they got was a stunning surprise.

The Mexican army, led by General Ignacio Zaragoza, was significantly outnumbered and far less equipped than the French troops. Yet the Mexican soldiers used their knowledge of the local terrain and fierce determination to defeat the French forces that day. It was a remarkable underdog victory — one that sent a powerful message: Mexico would not surrender its sovereignty without a fight.

## Why It Matters Historically

The Battle of Puebla did not end the French invasion. France eventually occupied Mexico for several years before Mexican resistance — aided in part by pressure from the United States after the Civil War ended — finally drove them out. However, the victory at Puebla became a powerful symbol of Mexican resistance and national pride. It demonstrated that a smaller, less-equipped force could stand up to a global superpower. General Zaragoza became a national hero, and May 5th was marked as a day to honor that courage.

## So Why Is It Bigger in the United States?

Here's where the story gets even more interesting. If you visited most parts of Mexico on May 5th, you wouldn't find massive celebrations. The holiday is observed mainly in the state of Puebla, where the battle actually took place. In the rest of Mexico, it's a relatively minor date on the calendar.

In the United States, however, Cinco de Mayo has grown into a large-scale cultural event. How did that happen? Historians point to Mexican-American communities in California who began celebrating the holiday in the 1860s — partly because the Battle of Puebla happened around the same time as the American Civil War, and many Mexican-Americans saw the fight against French imperialism as connected to their own struggles for freedom and dignity.

Over the decades, the holiday expanded beyond its original meaning. By the late 20th century, it had become heavily commercialized, promoted by food and beverage companies as a general celebration of Mexican culture. This is a clear example of how a holiday can change meaning when it crosses borders and generations. It's worth asking yourself: why do some holidays become commercialized, and what gets lost when that happens?

## Cultural Celebration vs. Historical Literacy

There's nothing wrong with celebrating culture — food, music, art, and traditions are all worth honoring. But there is a difference between celebrating a culture and understanding its history. Confusing Cinco de Mayo with Mexican Independence Day

(which is actually September 16th) is a common mix-up that flattens a rich and complex history into a stereotype.

When we take the time to learn the real story — a brave army defending its homeland against a powerful invader — we show genuine respect for Mexican history and identity. Consider how your understanding of this holiday has shifted after reading this article. How might knowing the true history change the way you choose to celebrate or discuss it?

### **Summary**

Cinco de Mayo commemorates the Mexican army's unexpected victory over French forces at the Battle of Puebla on May 5, 1862. It is not Mexican Independence Day. While the holiday is celebrated modestly in most of Mexico, it has grown into a major cultural event in the United States. Understanding the difference between the holiday's commercial image and its true historical significance helps us become more informed, respectful global citizens.

## Lesson Objective

In this lesson, you will explore the true history behind Cinco de Mayo and explain what the Battle of Puebla actually commemorates. You will also examine how this holiday's meaning has changed over time as it moved from Mexico to the United States. By the end, you will be able to describe how cultural celebrations can shift in meaning across borders and generations.

**Standard:** NCSS.I.2 — Cultural Contributions; NCSS.THEME.II — Time, Continuity, and Change; TEKS §113.20(b)(15)(A) — Identify Historical Significance

**Bloom's Level:** Understand

**Bloom's Goal:** Students will explain the historical significance of the Battle of Puebla and describe how Cinco de Mayo's cultural meaning has evolved over time.

**Explanation:** At the Understand level, students move beyond simply recalling facts to making sense of what those facts mean. Here, students will interpret the real history of Cinco de Mayo and put into their own words how a historical event can be reshaped by culture, commerce, and time.



Cinco de Mayo is celebrated with music, dance, and cultural traditions — but understanding its true history makes the celebration even more meaningful.

**Application Questions**

Read each question carefully and answer using what you learned from the article about Cinco de Mayo.

1. Why was the Mexican army's victory at the Battle of Puebla considered so surprising, and what did it symbolize for Mexico?

Think about: Think about the differences between the French and Mexican armies, and what the outcome of the battle communicated to the world about Mexico.

2. How did Cinco de Mayo's meaning change as it moved from Mexico to the United States, and what does this tell us about how holidays can shift over time?

Think about: Consider why Mexican-American communities first began celebrating the holiday and how its meaning changed as it became more commercialized.

**3.** Why is it important to understand the true history of Cinco de Mayo rather than just celebrating it based on popular misconceptions?

Think about: Think about the difference between celebrating a culture and understanding its history, and how knowing the real story shows respect for Mexican identity.

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**Primary Source Analysis (DBQ)**

Read the primary source excerpt below carefully. Then answer the four analysis questions that follow. Use evidence from the source and what you have learned about Cinco de Mayo to support your answers.

**Letter from General Ignacio Zaragoza to the Mexican Minister of War****[Letter]**

The national arms have covered themselves with glory. I can inform you that the French army has fought bravely, but its efforts were in vain against the courage and determination of the Mexican soldiers who defended this city. The enemy, though superior in numbers of trained troops and in the quality of their weapons, was repelled at every point. Our men, knowing the ground upon which they fought and inspired by love of their country, held firm against repeated assaults. The victory belongs not to me alone, but to every soldier who stood his ground this day. Mexico has shown the world that she will not yield her sovereignty to any foreign power, however great. Let this day be remembered as proof that a free people, defending their homeland, cannot be easily conquered. I write to you from Puebla, on the evening of May 5, 1862.

— General Ignacio Zaragoza, letter to the Mexican Minister of War, May 5, 1862 (adapted for educational use)

1. Who wrote this letter, and what was his role in the events described? How might his position as the commander of the Mexican army affect the way he describes the Battle of Puebla? **[Sourcing]**

2. Based on what you have learned, what was happening in Mexico in 1862 that led to the Battle of Puebla? Why was France invading Mexico at this time?

[Context]

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3. According to General Zaragoza, what advantages did the Mexican soldiers have over the French forces? Use specific details from the letter to support your answer.

[Close Reading]

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4. How does the message in Zaragoza's letter connect to the way Cinco de Mayo is remembered and celebrated today? Does the letter help explain why this battle became such an important symbol of Mexican national pride? [Corroboration]

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**Timeline Construction**

Place the five events below in the correct chronological order by arranging their letter IDs from earliest to latest. Then, for each event, write 1-2 sentences responding to the significance prompt — explaining why that event mattered historically or culturally.

**A.** Mexican-American communities in California begin celebrating the Battle of Puebla victory, connecting it to their own struggles for freedom during the American Civil War era.

**Date / Period:**

**Significance:**

Why did Mexican-Americans in California choose to celebrate this particular Mexican victory, and what does that connection tell us about how communities find meaning in historical events?

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**B.** France, under Emperor Napoleon III, invades Mexico after Mexico is unable to repay its debts to European nations.

**Date / Period:**

**Significance:**

Why did France use Mexico's financial troubles as a reason to invade, and what does this reveal about the relationship between powerful and less powerful nations in the 1800s?

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**C.** Cinco de Mayo becomes heavily commercialized in the United States, promoted by food and beverage companies as a general celebration of Mexican culture.

**Date / Period:**

**Significance:**

What is lost or changed when a holiday rooted in a specific historical struggle becomes a commercial event, and why does this matter for cultural understanding?

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**D.** General Ignacio Zaragoza leads the outnumbered Mexican army to a stunning victory over French forces at the Battle of Puebla.

**Date / Period:**

**Significance:**

Why was this victory considered so remarkable, and what message did it send about Mexico's willingness to defend its sovereignty?

**E.** French forces are eventually driven out of Mexico after years of occupation, aided in part by pressure from the United States following the end of the Civil War.

**Date / Period:**

**Significance:**

Why was it significant that the United States applied pressure to help end the French occupation, and what does this suggest about how neighboring nations can influence each other's struggles?

**Close Reading Passage**

Read the passage carefully. Then answer the five questions that follow. Use evidence from the passage to support your responses.

**The Battle of Puebla: The True Story Behind Cinco de Mayo**

On May 5, 1862, French forces — considered one of the most powerful armies in the world at the time — marched toward the city of Puebla, Mexico. They expected an easy victory. What they got was a stunning surprise. The Mexican army, led by General Ignacio Zaragoza, was significantly outnumbered and far less equipped than the French troops. Yet the Mexican soldiers used their knowledge of the local terrain and fierce determination to defeat the French forces that day. It was a remarkable underdog victory — one that sent a powerful message: Mexico would not surrender its sovereignty without a fight. The Battle of Puebla did not end the French invasion. France eventually occupied Mexico for several years before Mexican resistance finally drove them out. However, the victory at Puebla became a powerful symbol of Mexican resistance and national pride. It demonstrated that a smaller, less-equipped force could stand up to a global superpower. General Zaragoza became a national hero, and May 5th was marked as a day to honor that courage.

1. According to the passage, why were the French forces surprised by the outcome of the Battle of Puebla? **[Comprehension]**

2. What did the Mexican army's victory at the Battle of Puebla come to symbolize for the Mexican people? [\[Comprehension\]](#)

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3. Based on the passage, what can you infer about why General Ignacio Zaragoza became a national hero in Mexico? [\[Inference\]](#)

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4. The passage states that the Battle of Puebla "sent a powerful message." What message was being sent, and to whom was it directed? [\[Inference\]](#)

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5. The author describes the Mexican army's victory as a "remarkable underdog victory." Why does the author use the phrase "underdog victory," and how does this word choice affect the reader's understanding of the battle's significance? [\[Craft\]](#)

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**Reflection Questions**

Read each question carefully, think about what you learned in the article, and write a thoughtful response in your own words.

**1.** What does the Battle of Puebla actually commemorate, and why is it historically significant for Mexico?

Think about: Think about who was fighting, what the odds were, and what the victory meant for Mexico's identity and independence.

**2.** How did Cinco de Mayo's meaning change as it moved from Mexico to the United States, and what does that tell us about how holidays can shift over time?

Think about: Consider why Mexican-American communities first celebrated it in the 1860s and how commercialization later changed the holiday's message.

3. Why is it important to understand the true history behind a cultural holiday rather than just celebrating it based on popular assumptions?

Think about: Think about the difference between celebrating a culture and truly respecting it, and what gets lost when history is misunderstood or oversimplified.

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**Short Answer**

Answer each question in 1-2 complete sentences using what you learned from the article.

1. What event does Cinco de Mayo actually commemorate, and why was the outcome considered surprising?

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2. Why is Cinco de Mayo celebrated more widely in the United States than in most parts of Mexico?

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3. What is the difference between Cinco de Mayo and Mexican Independence Day?

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**Multiple Choice**

Choose the best answer for each question based on what you have learned about Cinco de Mayo and its historical significance.

1. What does Cinco de Mayo actually commemorate?
  - A. Mexican Independence Day on September 16th
  - B. The Mexican army's victory over French forces at the Battle of Puebla in 1862
  - C. The end of the Mexican-American War in 1848
  - D. The founding of Mexico City as the nation's capital
2. Why did France invade Mexico in 1862?
  - A. France wanted to expand its territory into South America
  - B. France was responding to a military attack by Mexico
  - C. Mexico could no longer repay money it had borrowed from European nations
  - D. France was trying to help Mexico fight against the United States
3. Which general led the Mexican army to victory at the Battle of Puebla?
  - A. Emperor Napoleon III
  - B. General Antonio López de Santa Anna
  - C. General Ignacio Zaragoza
  - D. General Porfirio Díaz

4. Why was the Mexican victory at the Battle of Puebla considered surprising?
- A. Mexico had a much larger and better-equipped army than France
  - B. The battle took place in a location that favored the French forces
  - C. France had already agreed to a peace treaty before the battle began
  - D. The Mexican army was outnumbered and far less equipped than the French troops
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5. What is the actual date of Mexican Independence Day?
- A. May 5th
  - B. July 4th
  - C. September 16th
  - D. October 12th
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6. In which part of Mexico is Cinco de Mayo most widely celebrated today?
- A. Mexico City, the nation's capital
  - B. The state of Puebla, where the battle took place
  - C. The northern border states closest to the United States
  - D. The entire country celebrates it equally
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7. Why did Mexican-American communities in California begin celebrating Cinco de Mayo in the 1860s?
- A. They wanted to honor the signing of a peace treaty between Mexico and the United States
  - B. They saw Mexico's fight against French imperialism as connected to their own struggles for freedom and dignity
  - C. The United States government declared it an official national holiday
  - D. They were celebrating the end of the French occupation of Mexico
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**8.** How did Cinco de Mayo change as it became more popular in the United States over time?

- A.** It became more focused on teaching the history of the Battle of Puebla
- B.** It was adopted as an official holiday by the Mexican government
- C.** It became heavily commercialized and promoted as a general celebration of Mexican culture
- D.** It gradually replaced Mexican Independence Day as the most important Mexican holiday

**9.** What does the article suggest is the difference between celebrating a culture and understanding its history?

- A.** Celebrating culture is more important than learning history
- B.** Understanding history means you should not participate in cultural celebrations
- C.** Knowing the true history shows genuine respect, while celebrating without knowledge can reduce a rich history to a stereotype
- D.** Cultural celebrations and historical knowledge have no connection to each other

**10.** What broader lesson does the article suggest we can learn from studying the true history of Cinco de Mayo?

- A.** American holidays are always more accurate than holidays from other countries
- B.** Historical literacy helps us become more informed and respectful global citizens
- C.** Commercialized holidays are always more popular than historically accurate ones
- D.** Holidays should only be celebrated in the countries where they originated

**True / False**

Read each statement carefully. Write T if the statement is true or F if the statement is false.

1. Cinco de Mayo is a celebration of Mexican Independence Day.

True  False

2. The Battle of Puebla took place on May 5, 1862.

True  False

3. France invaded Mexico because Mexico could no longer repay its debts to European nations.

True  False

4. The Mexican army was larger and better equipped than the French forces at the Battle of Puebla.

True  False

5. General Ignacio Zaragoza led the Mexican army to victory at the Battle of Puebla.

True  False

6. The Mexican victory at the Battle of Puebla permanently ended the French invasion of Mexico.

True  False

7. Cinco de Mayo is celebrated as a major national holiday throughout all of Mexico.

True  False

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8. Mexican-American communities in California began celebrating Cinco de Mayo in the 1860s.

True  False

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9. Mexico's actual Independence Day is celebrated on September 16th.

True  False

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10. Understanding the true history of Cinco de Mayo shows greater respect for Mexican culture and identity than simply celebrating it without knowing its origins.

True  False

**Vocabulary**

Review the vocabulary terms below. Each term comes from the article about Cinco de Mayo. Read each definition carefully so you can use these words correctly when discussing the holiday's history and cultural significance.

**commemorate**

To honor or remember an important person or event, often through a ceremony or celebration.

Explain in your own words:

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**misconception**

A wrong or mistaken belief about something, often caused by a lack of accurate information.

Explain in your own words:

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**historical literacy**

The ability to understand and accurately interpret events and facts from the past.

Explain in your own words:

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**sovereignty**

A country's right to govern itself freely without being controlled by another nation.  
Explain in your own words:

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**imperialism**

The practice of a powerful country extending its control over weaker countries, often by force.  
Explain in your own words:

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**terrain**

The physical features and landscape of a particular area of land.  
Explain in your own words:

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**resistance**

The act of fighting back against or refusing to give in to an opposing force or power.  
Explain in your own words:

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**commercialized**

Turned into something focused on making money, sometimes at the expense of its original meaning or purpose.

Explain in your own words:

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**cultural celebration**

A public event or tradition that honors the customs, history, and identity of a particular group of people.

Explain in your own words:

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**stereotype**

An oversimplified and often inaccurate idea about a group of people or their culture.

Explain in your own words:

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**Exit Ticket**

Answer both questions in 1-2 sentences each using what you learned from today's lesson.

1. What does Cinco de Mayo actually commemorate, and why was the Mexican army's victory at the Battle of Puebla considered so remarkable?

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2. Why is Cinco de Mayo celebrated more widely in the United States than in most parts of Mexico?

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The Battle of Puebla on May 5, 1862, was a surprising victory for the Mexican army against the much larger and better-equipped French forces.

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Cinco de Mayo is celebrated with music, dance, and cultural traditions — but understanding its true history makes the celebration even more meaningful.

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# Cinco de Mayo: What It Actually Commemorates

CROSSWORD PUZZLE



# Cinco de Mayo: What It Actually Commemorates

## CROSSWORD PUZZLE

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### ACROSS

2. The practice of a powerful country extending its control over weaker countries, often by force.
4. To honor or remember an important person or event, often through a ceremony or celebration.
8. A wrong or mistaken belief about something, often caused by a lack of accurate information.
10. The physical features and landscape of a particular area of land.

### DOWN

1. The ability to understand and accurately interpret events and facts from the past.
3. A public event or tradition that honors the customs, history, and identity of a particular group of people.
5. The act of fighting back against or refusing to give in to an opposing force or power.
6. Turned into something focused on making money, sometimes at the expense of its original meaning or purpose.
7. A country's right to govern itself freely without being controlled by another nation.
9. An oversimplified and often inaccurate idea about a group of people or their culture.

# Cinco de Mayo: What It Actually Commemorates

## WORD SEARCH

P F P Y C U L T U R A L C E L E B R A T I O N J  
V L S S X P I R H C P T D E E O W T E R R A I N  
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U O P K G H L J K T R O X I H B R R K L F G C N  
I H I S T O R I C A L L I T E R A C Y N B J K J

### FIND THESE WORDS

cultural celebration  
commemorate  
stereotype

historical literacy  
imperialism  
terrain

commercialized  
sovereignty

misconception  
resistance