

# The origins and meaning of Thanksgiving

**Language Focus:** 13 words, **Level:** Intermediate - Advanced

Thanksgiving is one of the most important holidays in the United States and Canada. Unlike many other American holidays, Thanksgiving isn't about gifts, **fireworks shows**, or games, it's about being with family, and giving thanks and celebrating your **blessings**. Christians pray and give thanks to God but many non-Christian Americans celebrate Thanksgiving too.

The modern Thanksgiving holiday is based on the Thanksgiving **harvest** festival celebrated by the Pilgrims, who were early **English settlers**. The Pilgrims landed in Plymouth Bay in modern-day Massachusetts in 1620. They celebrated Thanksgiving after their first successful harvest in 1621.

That first holiday **lasted** for three days, and was attended by both Pilgrim settlers and Native Americans and celebrated the friendship between them. During the previous winter, the Pilgrims had **struggled** to survive. Their **crops** had died in the sandy soil and they had trouble finding food. The winter in Massachusetts was much **harsher** than the winters back in England. Half the Pilgrims died and many more were at risk of dying. The local Native Americans provided the Pilgrims with food and supplies during the winter. The next summer, they also taught the Pilgrims several important **survival skills**, such as how to grow corn and catch **eel**. This festival marked one of the first friendly exchanges between European settlers and Native Americans.

Historically, Thanksgiving was celebrated at a time when most farmers were finished harvesting their crops. They would have a big dinner with their family and closest friends to celebrate their blessings and harvests. President Abraham Lincoln later established the tradition of a national and **annual** Thanksgiving holiday.

While most Americans are **no longer** farmers, the tradition of celebrating blessings and food remains and the holiday is still **held** at harvest time, on the second Monday of October in Canada and on the fourth Thursday of November in the United States.

## *Language Focus* : **Vocabulary + Expressions**

1. **fireworks shows** - (noun) a show where fireworks are used - also known as firework displays.  
**Fireworks** - explosive rockets that shoot up into the air and explode with loud noises, bright colours and different shapes. They are used at various celebrations and festivals.
  - *We went to see a **fireworks display** at Halloween.*
2. **blessings** - (noun) something that you are grateful for
  - *To be healthy is a **blessing**. Good health is something to be thankful for.*
3. **harvest** - (noun) the time of year when crops (food grown on a farm) are gathered or collected.
  - *There is always a lot of work to be done during the **harvest**.*
4. **settlers** - (noun) people who settle/decided to stay in in a place and make it their home  
**English settlers** - first English to arrive and settle in America
  - *The **settlers** treated the natives very badly.*
5. **lasted** - continued for a period of time, have a duration of.. (past simple of verb: **to last**)
  - *The strike lasted 5 days.*
  - *The football match lasted 90 minutes.*
6. **struggled** - tried hard to achieve something with great difficulty (past simple of verb: **to struggle**)
  - *The passenger **struggled** to carry his heavy bags.*
7. **crops** - (noun) plants that are grown commercially on a farm, such as fruit, grain and vegetables
  - *Harvest is the time when the **crops** are gathered.*
8. **harsher** - (adjective) more harsh, more difficult to survive in, more severe
  - *The higher the wind speed, the **harsher** the sea is during a storm.*

9. **survival skills** - (noun) skills, knowledge or abilities that help you to survive, that help you to stay alive
- *In the army, soldiers must use **survival skills** they have learned to stay alive in the wild.*
10. **eel** - (noun) a fish which lives in the water and is long and thin like a snake which can be caught and eaten as food
11. **annual** - (adjective) happening once a year
- *My birthday is an **annual** event.*
12. **no longer** - not anymore
- *John **no longer** lives in London, he moved to New York in 2014.*
13. **Held** - *to organise an event in a place , to have an event* (past simple of verb: to hold *an event*)
- *The concert was **held** in the stadium.*

## Language Focus: Exercises

### Comprehension Questions

Find the answers to these questions in the article..

1. What is the origin of the modern Thanksgiving holiday?
2. What was celebrated at the first Thanksgiving?
3. Why did many Pilgrims die in 1620-1621?
4. How did the Native Americans help the Pilgrims in Massachusetts?
5. Why is Thanksgiving still celebrated every year nationwide in the United States?

### Comprehension Questions: True or False ?

Say whether the following statements are true or false. If they are false, say why.

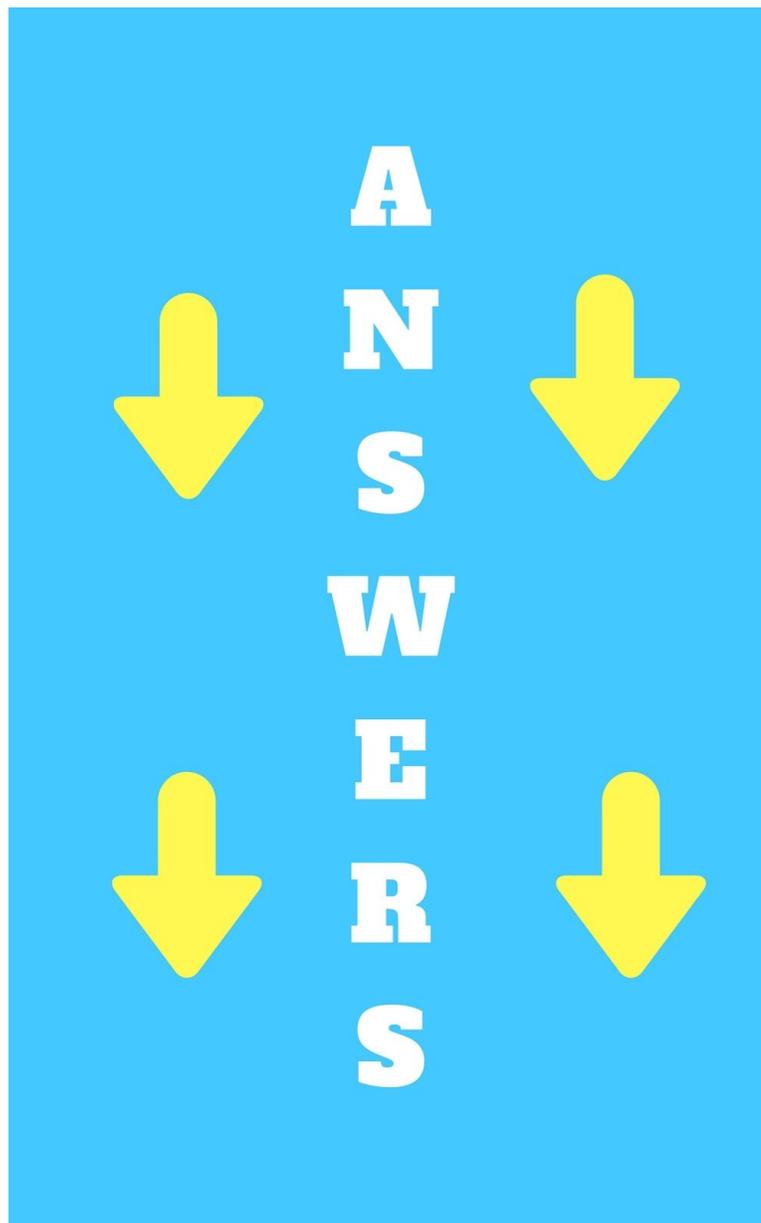
1. Thanksgiving is celebrated all over the world.
2. Thanksgiving is a Christian holiday.
3. Popular traditions on Thanksgiving include gift giving, firework shows and games.
4. The first Thanksgiving was celebrated by English settlers in 1621 because they had a successful harvest that year.
5. Because most Americans are no longer farmers, Thanksgiving is no longer celebrated during harvest time.
6. Thanksgiving is not celebrated at the same time in Canada and the United States.

### Complete the sentences: EXERCISES

Complete these sentences with a **highlighted** word or phrase from the article.

1. Our vacation ..... 2 weeks. (*had a duration of*)
2. Frank and Mary are ..... married. They got divorced last year. (not anymore)
3. Many European ..... arrived in America in the 15th century. (*people who decide to live in a place*)
4. Frank the farmer grows ..... such as corn and carrots. (*plants grown on a farm*)
5. Cockroaches can live in ..... environments than humans. (*more difficult*)
6. Children who join the scouts learn a lot of new ..... (things you learn which will help you survive)

7. Your children are a ..... .They bring you a lot of joy. (*sth that you are grateful for*)
8. When John graduated from college during the financial crisis, he ..... to find a job.
9. Our city has a ..... every New Year's Eve. (*event to celebrate sth with small rockets*)
10. An example of an ..... holiday is Saint Patrick's Day. (*happens every year*)



## ANSWERS SHEET

### Comprehension Questions: **ANSWERS**

1. *The modern Thanksgiving holiday is based on the Thanksgiving harvest festival celebrated by the Pilgrims, who were early English settlers.*
2. *They celebrated Thanksgiving after their first successful harvest in 1621...by both Pilgrim settlers and Native Americans and celebrated the friendship between them.*
3. *During the previous winter, the Pilgrims had struggled to survive. Their crops had died in the sandy soil and they had trouble finding food. The winter in Massachusetts was much harsher than the winters back in England.*
4. *The local Native Americans provided the Pilgrims with food and supplies during the winter. The next summer, they also taught the Pilgrims several important survival skills, such as how to grow corn and catch eel.*
5. *President Abraham Lincoln later established the tradition of a national and annual Thanksgiving holiday...*

### True or False ? : **ANSWERS**

1. FALSE: Thanksgiving is celebrated in the United States and Canada.
2. FALSE: Many non-Christians celebrate Thanksgiving.
3. FALSE: Thanksgiving is about being with family, giving thanks and celebrating your blessings.
4. TRUE
5. FALSE: Even though most Americans are no longer farmers, Thanksgiving is still held at harvest time.
6. TRUE

## Complete the sentences: **ANSWERS**

1. Our vacation **lasted** 2 weeks.
2. Frank and Mary are **no longer** married. They got divorced last year.
3. Many European **settlers** arrived in America in the 15th century.
4. Frank the farmer grows **crops** such as corn and carrots.
5. Cockroaches can live in **harsher** environments than humans.
6. Children who join the scouts learn a lot of new **survival skills**.
7. Your children are a **blessing** .They bring you a lot of joy.
8. When John graduated from college during the financial crisis, he **struggled** to find a job.
9. Our city has a **fireworks show** every New Year's Eve.
10. An example of an **annual** holiday is Saint Patrick's Day.