

READING CHALLENGE

Why We Celebrate New Year

Twelve grapes, 108 bells, and jumping into the ocean — how the world says goodbye to the old year

Level	A2 (Elementary)
Age Group	Teens (11-16)
Topic	History & Culture
Duration	~15 minutes
Skill	Reading

Every year, when the clock strikes **midnight** on 31 December, billions of people around the world cheer, hug, and wish each other “Happy New Year!” Fireworks light up the sky. People sing, dance, and laugh. It is one of the biggest celebrations on Earth. But why do we celebrate New Year? And why do different countries celebrate it in such different ways? Let us find out.

How It All Started

The idea of celebrating the new year is very, very old. The **ancient** Babylonians were probably the first people to have New Year celebrations, about 4,000 years ago. They lived in what is now Iraq. Their new year started in spring, around the end of March, when crops began to grow. They held a big religious festival called Akitu that lasted for eleven days. There was food, music, and prayers to their gods.

The **ancient** Egyptians celebrated their new year when the River Nile flooded every year. The flood brought water and rich soil to their farmland, so it was the start of a new **harvest** season. The Chinese New Year, which is still celebrated today, also started thousands of years ago. It follows a lunar **calendar** and falls in January or February.

So why is our New Year on 1 January? We can thank the **ancient** Romans. In 46 BC, the Roman leader Julius Caesar created a new **calendar** — the Julian **calendar**. He decided that the year would start on 1 January. January was named after Janus, the Roman god who had two faces — one looking back at the old year and one looking forward to the new year. Janus was a **symbol** of beginnings and endings. It was the perfect choice.

New Year in Spain: Twelve Lucky Grapes

In Spain, New Year’s Eve is called “Nochevieja” — which means “Old Night.” The most famous Spanish **tradition** happens at **midnight**. When the clock starts to strike twelve, everyone eats twelve grapes — one grape for each strike of the bell. You must eat all twelve grapes before the bells stop. Each grape represents one month of the coming year. If you eat all twelve in time, you will have good luck for the whole year.

This **tradition** started around the year 1900. Some people say it began because grape farmers in Alicante had too many grapes one year. They told people that eating grapes at **midnight** would bring good luck. The idea became very traditional. Today, millions of Spaniards eat their grapes together. The most famous place to do it is the Puerta del Sol square in Madrid, where thousands of people gather and watch the clock tower. It looks easy, but eating twelve grapes in twelve seconds is actually quite difficult!

New Year in Japan: 108 Bells

In Japan, New Year is the most important holiday of the year. It is called “Oshogatsu.” Japanese people prepare for weeks. They clean their homes very carefully, because they

believe that cleaning removes bad luck from the old year. They also pay all their debts and solve any arguments with friends or family. They want to start the new year fresh and clean.

On New Year's Eve, Buddhist temples across Japan ring their bells exactly 108 times. This **tradition** is called "Joya no Kane." In Buddhist belief, humans have 108 earthly desires that cause suffering. Each ring of the bell removes one of these desires. The last ring happens at **midnight** — the start of the new year, free from the problems of the past.

On New Year's Day, Japanese families eat a special meal called "Osechi." The food comes in beautiful boxes. Every dish has a special meaning. Prawns represent long life because they have curved backs like old people. Black beans mean good health. Sweet chestnuts mean **prosperity** — having enough money. It is a **feast** full of hope and meaning.

New Year in Brazil: White Clothes and the Ocean

In Brazil, 31 December is one of the most exciting nights of the year. Millions of people go to the beach. The most famous **celebration** is on Copacabana Beach in Rio de Janeiro, where more than two million people come together. Almost everyone wears white clothes. White is a **symbol** of peace and new beginnings.

At **midnight**, the sky explodes with fireworks. Then many people walk into the ocean. They jump over seven waves and make a wish with each wave. This **superstition** comes from the Afro-Brazilian religion Candomble. People also throw white flowers into the water as a gift to Yemanja, the goddess of the sea. If the waves take the flowers out to sea, it means Yemanja has accepted the gift and the new year will be good. If the waves push the flowers back to the beach, the person should try again.

New Year in Scotland: First-Footing

In Scotland, New Year's Eve is called "Hogmanay," and it is the biggest **celebration** of the year — even bigger than Christmas for many Scottish people. One of the most interesting traditions is called "first-footing." This means that the first person to enter your house after **midnight** is very important. The best first-footer is a tall man with dark hair. He should bring gifts: a piece of coal for warmth, bread for food, salt for flavour, and whisky for good cheer. This visitor brings good luck to the house for the whole year.

At **midnight**, everyone sings a famous Scottish song called "Auld Lang Syne." The words were written by the Scottish poet Robert Burns in 1788. The title means "old long ago" — it is a song about remembering old friends. Today, people all over the world sing this song on New Year's Eve, even if they do not know all the words. Most people just hold hands, sway from side to side, and sing the parts they know.

New Year in Denmark: Broken Plates

Denmark has one of the strangest New Year traditions in Europe. On New Year's Eve, Danish people save their old, chipped, or broken plates. Then they throw them at the front doors of their friends and neighbours! Finding a big pile of broken plates outside your door on New Year's Day is actually a very good thing. It means you have many friends who care about you. The more broken plates, the more popular you are.

Danish people also have another fun **tradition**. At **midnight**, they stand on chairs and sofas. When the clock strikes twelve, they all jump off at the same time. They are "jumping into the new year." It sounds silly, but everyone does it and everyone laughs. It is a happy way to start a fresh year.

New Year in the Philippines: Round Shapes

In the Philippines, people believe that round shapes bring wealth and good luck because they look like coins. On New Year's Eve, families fill their tables with round fruits — oranges, melons, and grapes. They try to have exactly twelve round fruits, one for each month. Children and adults wear clothes with round dots. Some people even put coins in their pockets and shake them at **midnight** to attract money.

The Philippines is also one of the noisiest places in the world on New Year's Eve. People believe that loud sounds drive away bad spirits. They honk car horns, bang pots and pans, blow whistles, and set off fireworks. The noise is incredible. Some families even open all the doors and windows of their house to let the old year escape and the new year come in.

New Year in Ecuador: Burning the Old Year

In Ecuador, people build large puppets called "monigotes." These puppets represent the old year. Some look like politicians, cartoon characters, or celebrities. Families spend weeks making them out of old clothes, newspapers, and sawdust. At **midnight** on 31 December, people set the monigotes on fire. The flames symbolise the destruction of everything bad from the old year. People dance around the fires and celebrate the fresh start.

New Year Resolutions

One **tradition** that many countries share is making New Year resolutions. A **resolution** is a promise to yourself. "I will exercise more." "I will study harder." "I will be kinder to my sister." People make these promises on 1 January because the new year feels like a fresh beginning — a chance to become a better person.

This **tradition** is also very old. The **ancient** Babylonians made promises to their gods at the start of each year. The Romans made promises to Janus. Today, studies show that about 40% of adults make New Year resolutions. But how many people keep them? Unfortunately, not many. Research says that only about 9% of people actually achieve their **resolution**. But that does not stop people from trying. Every new year brings new hope.

The Midnight Countdown

Perhaps the most exciting moment of any New Year **celebration** is the **countdown**. In the final seconds of the old year, people count together: “Ten! Nine! Eight! Seven! Six! Five! Four! Three! Two! One! Happy New Year!” The feeling of counting down with thousands — or even millions — of other people is electric. Famous countdowns happen in New York (Times Square), London (Big Ben), Sydney (the Harbour Bridge), and many other cities. Television cameras broadcast these moments to billions of viewers worldwide.

One World, Many Celebrations

What is amazing about New Year is that everyone celebrates it, but everyone celebrates it differently. Grapes in Spain. Bells in Japan. Waves in Brazil. Broken plates in Denmark. Round fruits in the Philippines. Burning puppets in Ecuador. Every culture has its own way of saying goodbye to the old year and hello to the new one.

But look carefully, and you will see that all these traditions share the same ideas. People want to leave bad things behind. They want good luck, health, and happiness. They want to be with the people they love. They want to start again. No matter where you live or what language you speak, the message of New Year is the same: tomorrow can be better than today. And that is something worth celebrating.

Vocabulary

Term	Definition
celebration	a party or special event to show that something is important or happy
tradition	a custom or way of doing something that people have followed for a long time
midnight	twelve o'clock at night, the middle of the night
firework	a small device that explodes in the sky and makes bright colours and loud sounds
countdown	counting numbers backwards to zero before something exciting happens
resolution	a promise you make to yourself to do something better in the new year
symbol	something that represents or stands for an idea or a feeling
calendar	a system that organises days, weeks, and months in a year
feast	a very large, special meal with lots of food, usually for a celebration
ancient	very, very old, from thousands of years ago
harvest	the time when crops like wheat, rice, or fruit are collected from the fields
superstition	a belief that certain actions bring good or bad luck, even without proof
prosperity	having enough money and being successful in life
temple	a building where people go to pray and practise their religion
parade	a public event where people walk or drive through the streets to celebrate

Comprehension Quiz

1. Which ancient civilisation celebrated New Year about 4,000 years ago?

- A) The ancient Egyptians
- B) The ancient Romans
- C) The Babylonians
- D) The ancient Chinese

2. What do people in Spain do at midnight on New Year's Eve?

- A) They jump into the sea
- B) They eat 12 grapes, one for each bell strike
- C) They break plates on the ground
- D) They ring bells 108 times

3. Why do Japanese temples ring their bells exactly 108 times?

- A) Because there are 108 temples in Japan
- B) Because the year has 108 weeks
- C) Because Buddhist belief says humans have 108 earthly desires that cause suffering
- D) Because 108 is a lucky number in Japanese culture

4. Why do many Brazilians wear white clothes on New Year's Eve?

- A) Because it is the national colour of Brazil
- B) Because white is a symbol of peace and new beginnings
- C) Because it is very hot in Brazil in December
- D) Because the government says they must

5. What do people in Denmark do with plates on New Year's Eve?

- A) They paint them with bright colours
- B) They fill them with special food
- C) They throw old plates at their friends' front doors
- D) They wash all their plates before midnight

Answer Key

#	Answer	Question
1	C	1. Which ancient civilisation celebrated New Year about 4,000 years ago?
2	B	2. What do people in Spain do at midnight on New Year's Eve?
3	C	3. Why do Japanese temples ring their bells exactly 108 times?
4	B	4. Why do many Brazilians wear white clothes on New Year's Eve?
5	C	5. What do people in Denmark do with plates on New Year's Eve?