

GESE 7 National Customs Lesson

Task 1: Speaking

Look at the following houses/homes. Which would you prefer to live in? Discuss with your partner.



Describe your house to your partner. Talk about:

- how many rooms you have and what they are
- the exterior and the interior of your house
- the windows and doors
- the outside areas
- how private your house is

Task 2: Reading

The following text is about *window blinds* or *shutters* in Spain. Do you cover the windows in your house? Are there window blinds? Curtains?

Read the text and compare your customs to those in Spain and elsewhere in Europe. Which custom is the most similar to yours?



Paragraph 1

How private is your house? The answer to this question may depend on your culture. In Spain, for example, the people seem to be obsessed with window blinds. Spain enjoys plenty of hours of sun, but yet apartments and houses are often completely shut off to natural light. Why is this? “It’s like Spaniards are afraid of light,” says Caroline Jurgens, a 42-year-old Dutch woman who has been living in Spain since 2005. One of the first things she noticed when she arrived from Amsterdam was the number of homes with the shutters down.

Paragraph 2

Jurgens notes that the Spanish “pull their shutters down all year long, even in winter when it’s not so hot. The Dutch do the opposite: we need light all the time,” she says. This contrast could be the result of historical influences the different countries in Europe have experienced. In Spain, there are still many customs that derive from the Arabic culture, like “living toward the inside of your house, keeping the interior pretty, such as the central courtyard, and peeking out through the window pane,” says Jurgens.

Paragraph 3

This is in contrast to the protestant culture of many countries in the centre of Europe. Anyone who has visited these countries can confirm that you can often see directly inside the house of your neighbours. This is because there is a custom that a house should be kept open to show the honesty of its guests and to prove you are not afraid of showing if you are rich or poor. For the Dutch not having shutters (or the curtains open) “shows a willingness to share information, to say we have nothing to hide,” explains Jurgens.

Paragraph 4

While Spaniards are known for being open people, they are protective of their private life. They may be friendly with their neighbours but they are unlikely to invite them in for a cup of coffee. “The more they are in the street, the better they get to know their neighbours,” says Juan Carlos Barajas, sociologist and author of the website Fun Sociology. “Because of this greater closeness, there is more interest in learning about *other* lives and less interest in letting others know about *theirs*. That’s why they have to put up barriers.”

Paragraph 5

And that’s where religion comes in. “Catholic ethics imply a greater concern for what will be said, for doing what is socially expected of you, and for doing your dirty washing inside,” he adds. “So you have to put up a barrier - shutters and curtains that separate your house from the outside so you can do what you don’t want others to see you doing.” Compare this with the wide, open windows that can be found in many central European and American cities, where people can easily see what is happening inside and a culture of openness exists. So, open or closed? It’s a question of culture.

Answer the following questions about the text:

Questions 1–5

The text has five paragraphs (1–5). Choose the best title for each paragraph from A–F below and write the letter (A–F) on the lines below. There is one title you don't need.

1. Paragraph 1 _____
2. Paragraph 2 _____
3. Paragraph 3 _____
4. Paragraph 4 _____
5. Paragraph 5 _____

- | | |
|----------|--|
| A | Influences from the past |
| B | Problems with open houses |
| C | Houses without natural light |
| D | A culture of openness |
| E | Hide inside or show what you're doing? |
| F | Private people |

Questions 6–10

Choose the five statements from A–H below that are TRUE according to the information given in the text. Write the letters of the TRUE statements on the lines below (in any order).

6. _____
7. _____
8. _____
9. _____
10. _____

- | | |
|----------|---|
| A | Spanish people like to keep the light out of their homes. |
| B | Caroline Jurgens observed differences in culture when she first arrived in Spain. |
| C | The culture of many European countries is influenced by Arabic customs. |
| D | In central Europe the windows are less likely to be covered than in Spain. |
| E | The Dutch open their curtains so that people can see they aren't concealing anything. |
| F | Spanish neighbours like to meet and have a drink. |
| G | Spaniards prefer to hide what they are doing inside the house. |
| H | Religion has little influence on whether the house is open or closed. |

Questions 11–15

Complete sentences 11–15 with an exact word, phrase or number from the text (maximum three words). Write the exact word, phrase or number on the lines below.

11. In Spain, window blinds are used as a way of shutting out _____.
12. There is a _____ between Spanish and Dutch customs regarding windows.
13. In central Europe, people keep curtains and shutters open because they don't have anything _____.
14. Spaniards don't like to share their _____ with their neighbours.
15. Catholics may try to build a _____ between themselves and the outside world.

Task 3: Discussion

Think about and discuss the following questions:

- Do you prefer to let in or keep out natural light in your home?
- How often do you invite people inside your home?
- Which is prettier, the interior or the exterior of your home?
- Apart from the use of window shutters, are there other ways in which religion and historical influences affect our homes and how we live?

Think about

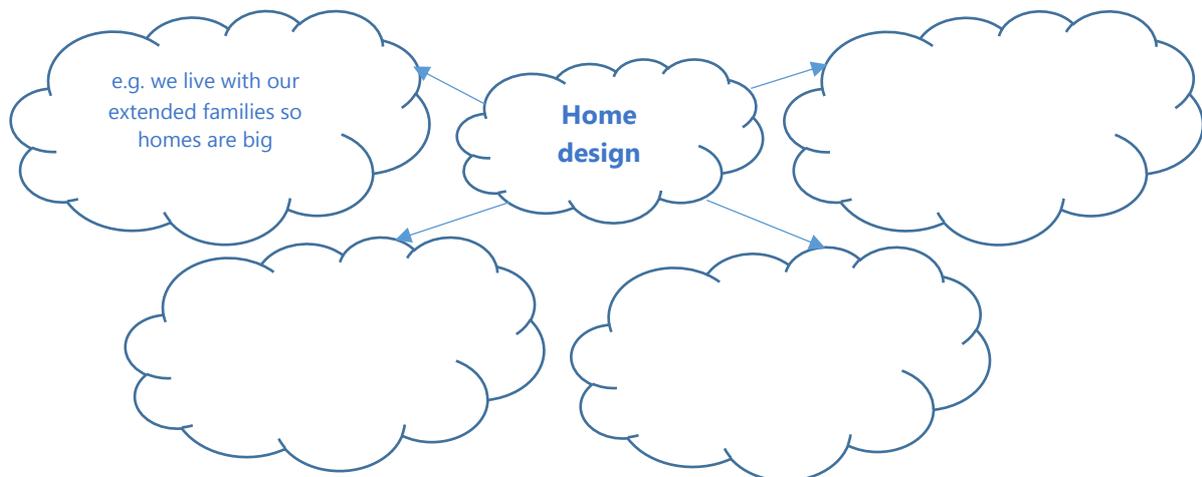
- the size of the family unit,
- who shares the spaces,
- how food is prepared and eaten,
- how people interact,
- how much time is spent inside vs outside etc.

and how these factors affect the way the home is designed.

Task 4: Writing

Write an article (150–180) words for a travel website about the types of houses visitors can find in your area. Explain why houses are designed the way they are and how they reflect the customs of your area.

It's important to **plan** your writing before you begin. Look back at some of the factors in the previous speaking task that you might want to include in the article and write some notes:



Don't forget to include an introduction and conclusion and to check your work!

Answer Key

1. C
2. A
3. D
4. F
5. E

6-10 in any order

6. A
7. B
8. D
9. E
10. G

11. (natural) light
12. contrast
13. to hide
14. lives / private life
15. barrier