

Zero the Shy Ghost: A Place Value Lesson

Grade: 1st

Subject: Math

Date: 5/18/26

Topic: Understanding Tens and Ones— and Zeros Special Role as a Placeholder

Content Standard (Common Core): Number and Operations in Base Ten 1.NBT

Learning Objectives:

- Understand that zero holds a place in numbers even though it has no value of its own.
- Identify the tens place and ones place in 2-digit numbers.
- Recognize that a digit's position determines its value.
- Connect zeros' "present but invisible" role to Gustavo's character from the story.
- Read and write 2-digit numbers using a place value mat.

Essential Question:

Can something be important even when it seems invisible? Just like the ghost Gustavo, the number zero is always holding its place in a number, even when it has nothing to count.

Materials Needed:

- Book: *Gustavo the Shy Ghost* by Flavia Z. Drago
- Anchor Chart: Zero is Like Gustavo!
- Printable: Place Value Mats (Tens and Ones Place)
- Manipulatives: Base-ten blocks (tens rods & ones cubes)
- Printed Out Digit Cards 0-9 (With a ghost to represent 0) one pair per group.

- Independent Worksheets

Structure/Activity:

Part 1: Read Aloud

Read *Gustavo the Shy Ghost* together. Pause to discuss how Gustavo is always around but nobody notices him. Ask “Is Gustavo still important even if no one can see him?” Then transition: “There is a number just like Gustavo always there but we often forget. That number is zero!”

Part 2: Direct Instruction

Write the number 20 on the board. Place 1 ten rod on the place value mat, leaving the ones column empty. Point to zero: “This is the Gustavo of numbers, sitting in the ones place, holding it, but with nothing to count.”

Ask: What if we forgot about Gustavo and just wrote a 2? Show that 2 and 20 are very different. Report with 10, 30, and 14 to compare numbers with and without zero.

Part 3: Guided Practice

Have students get into pairs of 2. Give each pair digit cards (0-9) and a place value mat. Call out a number (ex. 30!) and have students place digit cards in the correct columns using a ghost cutout for zero.

Pairs say aloud: “There are __ tens and __ ones. Gustavo is in the ones place!”

Part 4: Independent Practice

Students complete the “Gustavo’s Number House” worksheet. Given numbers like 10, 20, 35, 40, 12, write the correct digit in the Tens room and Ones room, drawing a small ghost wherever zero appears.

As a bonus, have students write their own Gustavo number (any multiple of 10 up to 90).

Part 5: Closing

Gather students and ask “What did we learn about zero today? Is zero important even if it doesn’t count anything? Connect back to Gustavo, he had friends who noticed him, and zero had value before we noticed.”

Give out the exit ticket: Show a number (10, 20, 30) and have students give a thumbs up if zero is in the ones place.

Assessment:

- During lesson, observe guided practice— are students placing zero correctly on the mat?
- Exit Ticket: Show a number (10, 20, 30) and have students give a thumbs up if zero is in the ones place.
- Use Independent work to gauge their own understanding.

Digit Cards

1

2

3

4

5

6

7

8

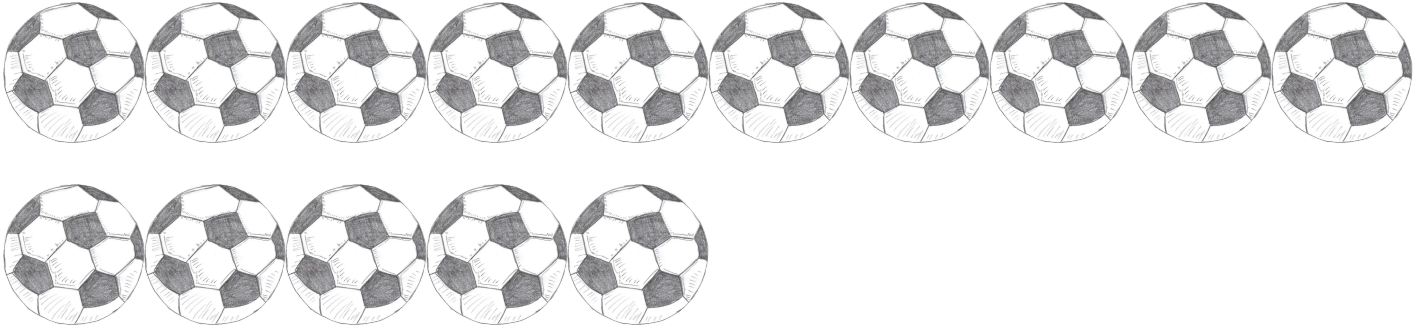
9



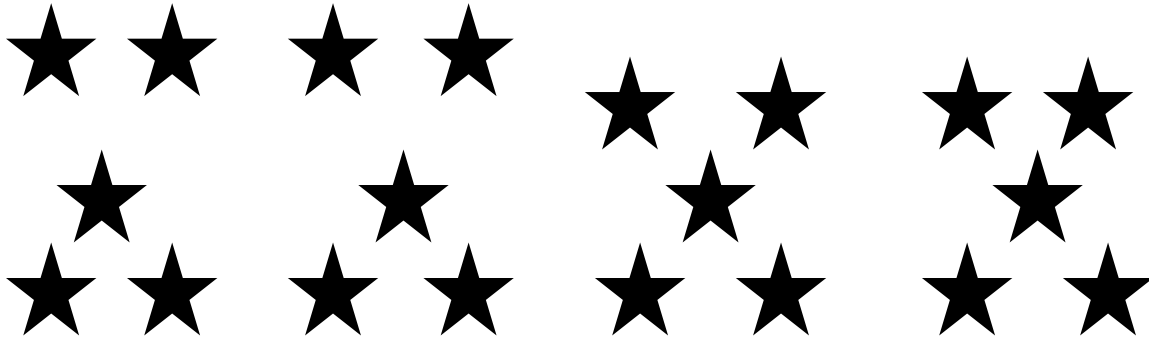
Gustavo's Number House

Identifying Tens and Ones

Group the numbers by 10 and write the number in their house. When a zero appears, draw Gustavo!



Tens	Ones



Tens	Ones

