



**UNIT 3:  
FOOD AND POWER**

L.23

# FOOD AND ITS RELATIONSHIPS TO POWER

## Note to Teachers

Lesson 23 explores the concept of power and how it works in relation to food. It offers examples of how eaters have wielded power and what limits consumers face in understanding their food choices. Power is an abstract concept but we can see, hear and feel the ways it is wielded by the powerful.

Students show a sophisticated understanding of some structural inequities (witness the #MeToo movement and recent rallies against gun violence). At the same time, adolescent psychologists remind us that teens see the world from their own perspective, so they may tend to think of themselves as fully autonomous agents. As a result, it can be difficult for teens to grasp the thesis of this lesson: that they have the freedom of choice over what foods they choose to buy, but that large power structures dictate what foods are available and even what types of food businesses exist where they live. As a result, teachers need to be on their toes during this class, so that they can untangle and highlight the strands of ideas raised in student writing and discussion.

### Goals *In this lesson, students will*

- develop a working definition of power
- begin to understand how relations of power can affect access to healthy food

### Objectives

- Students will use a series of short writing prompts to examine and extend their understanding of the workings of power and its stakeholders.
- Students will use their writing and subsequent discussion to evaluate the power of an average consumer.



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Please use this margin to notate how to best adapt this curriculum to your students.

## Materials

- Google map of the neighborhood
- Grocery Store Scavenger Hunt Rubric

## Instructions

### Part I: The Concept of Power

1. Let's start with some writing that will help us think about the concept of power.

#### **FOCUSED FREE WRITE PROMPTS:**

- a. **#1** (2 minutes): In what ways do you have power? (And how might you exercise that power?)
- b. **#2** (2 minutes): In what ways do you lack power?

Make two lists on the board as students share out what they wrote. What examples of power do they provide? What examples of their lack of power do they offer?

2. Defining Power: With the lists in front of you, ask students to define some of the characteristics of power. Encourage them to listen carefully and to build on each others' ideas.

Three ideas that you will want to draw out of their examples if you can will be important to the rest of the discussion:

- a. Power is distributed unequally, but—except under quite extreme circumstances—everyone has at least some power.
- b. Power can take the form of “power to” – the ability to do something or be something.
- c. Power can take the form of “power over” – the ability to influence someone else.

### Part II: Food and Power

1. Understanding the stakeholders

**FOCUSED FREE WRITE #3** (5 minutes): Who holds power relative to food? What kind of power do they have?

Encourage students not to stop with their first thought, but to identify all of the stakeholders that they can think of. Write on the board, without explanation first, all of those they identified as power holders.

- They may include themselves, their parents, consumers in general, farmers, food companies, etc.

The idea, first, is to see how many stakeholders there are. You will probably need to add more as you go.

- Single out a few to get an overview of the power they have.

1. You make choices about what to eat and what it means to you. You may find some foods particularly meaningful or delicious, some foods to be trendy or cool, some foods to be taboo.

2. Food companies decide which processed foods to make and how to do so.



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- In their journals, ask students to draw a spectrum from most to least powerful, running vertically down the page. Ask students to assign stakeholders a place on that spectrum, considering carefully why they make the choices that they do.

Selectively share some responses, encouraging students to weigh in and offer their corrections or adjustments.

## 2. Digging deeper

### FOCUSED FREE WRITE PROMPTS

- #4** (3 minutes): Ask students to imagine the following scenario: If you had \$10 in your pocket for food, what kinds of power do you have?
  - Ask students to share out their responses. You may hear ideas like this:
    - To choose what you buy to eat
    - Where to buy it
    - Whether or not to use it all for yourself or to share what you buy
- #5** (5 minutes): You still have \$10 in your pocket for food. What limits your power to choose what you eat?
  - Again, encourage students to move beyond their first ideas.
  - Ask students to share out their responses. Most students will need little prompting to understand and articulate the types of responses they can draft to this question:
    - WHERE a student with \$10 can buy food: is there a supermarket in your neighborhood? Or a bodega? Are there restaurants or fast food stores? Is there a farmer's market?
    - WHAT TYPES OF FOODS are available: are fresh produce and whole foods available, or is most of the available food processed? Would you describe the foods as being more or less healthy in terms of ingredients and preparation techniques?  
Is the food made of high or low or uneven quality raw materials? Can you buy food that is in season? Sustainably grown? Or is the available food industrially produced?
    - WHAT ADVERTISING, SOCIAL MEDIA, OR TRENDS ENCOURAGE YOU TO EAT: Are you influenced by the advertising you have seen? Do you go for familiar brands?  
At this point, you will likely need to push students a bit further or add to their responses. Other entities that limit their choices:
    - Food companies, by deciding what to produce and the quality of the food they use to do so.
    - Governments, who decide economic policy, who our favored trade partners will be, and what kind of support small and sustainable farms will receive.

## 3. Setting up the next lessons

**FOCUSED FREE WRITE #6** (3 minutes): Government exercises power, in part, by creating policy. U.S. federal government policy since the 1930s has been to subsidize the growing of corn and soybeans through a variety of support mechanisms, while more specialized food crops have not received similar support. Does that government policy affect your power?



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This Focused Free Write will indicate students' ability to connect this lesson with previous lessons and the curriculum's themes. For example, do they remember that corn and soy are grown mostly for animals from the Industrial Agriculture lesson?

Do they remember that grazing animals are fed corn and soy in conventional systems, but that they evolved to eat grasses?

Are students aware that corn and soy are extremely common components of processed food, including products like corn syrup?

Do students understand that federal policies that support corn and soy incentivize conventional agriculture and highly processed food?

Are students aware that much corn and soy seed has been genetically modified?

As students share their responses, take note of and highlight the threads of their knowledge. Feel free to tell students that the first lessons in this unit will focus on examples of the government's expression of its power.

4. Wrap up this conversation by thinking about the net result: How much power does the consumer have? Where is it best expressed? What are its limits?

### Part III: Grocery Store Scavenger Hunt

For this lesson, the cooking lab has been replaced with a grocery store scavenger hunt. See attached materials.

#### GROCERY STORE EXPLORATION

The food available to us in supermarkets, small shops and convenience stores is in some part a consequence of government and business policy. This exercise is designed to help students learn about how large power structures manifest themselves on a daily basis.

A typical supermarket may seem to provide a lot of options, but we often find, on closer inspection, that it offers many versions of the same thing. What we experience as choice may not be. Today's exercise is to explore this issue.

As a courtesy, please contact your target supermarket in advance.

#### Part I: Neighborhood mapping (30 minutes):

Begin this exercise by exploring where students could buy food in the neighborhood right around the school.

1. Use a Google map image of the neighborhood surrounding the school (perhaps a scale of roughly 1 square mile). Project on a smart or white board, print out copies, or use the online version and add pins.
2. Ask students to identify the places where food is for sale, outside of restaurants and fast food restaurants: supermarkets, corner stores, convenience stores, etc.
3. Beginning with in-class writing or brainstorming with the full class, ask students to think about:
  - What kinds of food can they find in each type of place? (snacks, fresh food, etc.)
  - How extensive would they describe their food options to be among all of these options?



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## Part II: Grocery Store Exploration (1 hour)

The Scavenger Hunt asks students to explore the nearest supermarket from two angles:

- To consider its overall organization and the types of foods displayed most prominently.
- To look at some specific foods and the options available for purchase.
  1. Go with students into the nearest grocery store and distribute copies of the attached handout.
  2. This exercise will take about one hour. Students should move in small groups, with one adult escort.

## Part III: Discussion and analysis (30 minutes)

Open the floor for discussion to help students discuss and digest their discoveries.

Then ask them to revisit the question they asked before they left for the grocery store: How great is their sense of choice? (Are their perceptions the same as before, or have they evolved?)



*This program is made possible by generous support from Unilever.*



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NAME:

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DATE:

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STORE NAME:

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## FOOD TERMS LIST

As you go through the market, what terms do you notice on labels and signs that encourage you to buy a food? Do you see terms on display signs and packages that make food sound appealing or healthy?

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## DECODING A SHELF PRICE LABEL

Walk up to any grocery store shelf and look for the store label that gives the price for a product. On it, you will notice that the price is listed in more than one way.

What price categories do you see listed?

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Why do you think the price is listed in more than one way?

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## UNDERSTANDING YOUR OPTIONS

PRODUCE	How many varieties are there?	What is the price range between the least and most expensive option?	Is there an organic option?	Does the display or packaging indicate where it is from? If so, where?	Is there a local option?
APPLES					
ONIONS					
ONE OTHER FRUIT OR VEGETABLE					

**EGGS:**

What different options do you have when buying eggs?

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Price of the most expensive eggs:

Description: \_\_\_\_\_

\$ .....

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Price of the least expensive eggs:

Description: \_\_\_\_\_

\$ .....

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**Rubric: GROCERY STORE EXPLORATION**

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**MILK**

How many brands are available? \_\_\_\_\_

How many percentages of milk fat content can you buy? \_\_\_\_\_

Beyond milk fat and flavor (such as chocolate), do you have any other choices when you select milk? (Hormone free, grass fed, etc.) \_\_\_\_\_

Price of the most expensive milk: Description: \_\_\_\_\_  
\$ ..... \_\_\_\_\_

Price of the least expensive milk: Description: \_\_\_\_\_  
\$ ..... \_\_\_\_\_

**MILK ALTERNATIVES**

How many cow's milk alternatives can you find (dairy or non-dairy)? \_\_\_\_\_

What are they made of? \_\_\_\_\_

Price of the most expensive alternative: Description: \_\_\_\_\_  
\$ ..... \_\_\_\_\_

Price of the least expensive alternative: Description: \_\_\_\_\_  
\$ ..... \_\_\_\_\_





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Rubric: GROCERY STORE EXPLORATION

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MEAT

Select ONE for exploration:

CHICKEN ..... PORK ..... BEEF .....

How many brands are available for purchase? List the brand names:

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

How many different cuts do you see?

\_\_\_\_\_

Do you know what parts of the animal any of these cuts represent?

\_\_\_\_\_

Price of the most expensive cut:

Description: \_\_\_\_\_

\$ ..... /pound

\_\_\_\_\_

Price of the most least cut:

Description: \_\_\_\_\_

\$ ..... /pound

\_\_\_\_\_

DISPLAY

What kinds of foods are displayed most prominently?  
Where are those prominent locations?  
(What products does the store most encourage you to buy?)

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_



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### GROCERY STORE OVERVIEW

Draw a sketch of the store's layout:

- Identify roughly where you found the products you examined above.
- Identify where processed foods (cereals, snack foods, canned foods, etc.) can be found.

