



**UNIT 1:  
FOOD AND CULTURE**

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# OUR FOOD TRADITIONS

## Note to Teachers

This lesson is designed to encourage students to think about the food traditions within their own families. Your students may be recent immigrants or come from families with a long association with the U.S. (whether citizen or not). The family's ethnic and cultural traditions might appear daily on the dinner table or mainly on holidays. Students often love the foods coming from those traditions but have generally thought very little about what they might mean—for them, their families, or their cultures. This lesson is geared to get students to think more systematically about that tradition, and to value those who—by cooking meals, sharing food, or writing cookbooks—help to keep those traditions alive.

This lesson also sets students up for an assignment that asks them to explore their cultural origins. The assignment accompanies this lesson.

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

- understand that their family food traditions carry meaning worth recognition and study.
- learn that storytelling is an accessible and valuable way to convey meaning.

### Objectives

- Students will use a series of short writing prompts to construct a narrative about their family food traditions.
- Students will work collaboratively to develop and improve one of those narratives.
- In sharing the narratives, students will model an avenue to explore of a family food tradition, encourage comparative thinking, and set students up to begin a fuller exploration of family tradition.



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

## Instructions

1. **FOCUSED FREE WRITE #1** (4 minutes): As a journalist recently reminded us, [unless we are Native Americans] we are all immigrants, refugees, or their descendants. As recent or less recent immigrants, our families brought food traditions with them from their countries and cultures of origins. What are your family's ethnic or cultural origins, and how are those origins manifested at the dinner table?

In this Focused Free Write, describe the food tradition you most associate with your family's ethnic origins. (If your parents or guardians come from two different traditions, describe the one that you feel most familiar with.) What is the tradition, and what are the general characteristics you would associate with it? Common ingredients? Cooking techniques?

2. **FFW #2** (6 minutes): Is there a food or dish that, for you, is the essence of your food tradition? If so, what is it and why? If not, describe one food or dish that is really popular in your cultural tradition—and consider why it is so popular. What is the food or dish made of, to the best of your knowledge? Who makes it? Do you eat it often, or only certain times a year?
3. **FFW #3** (4 minutes): Think a bit more deeply about your food or one ingredient in your dish. Where does it come from? Is it indigenous to the area where your family originated? If not, do you have any idea when or by whom it was brought to the place your family came from? Can you, in other words, deduce why it became a part of your family's food tradition?

**MODEL:** Let's imagine, for example, that your family is Italian and the dish that most represents for you that culture is pasta with tomato sauce. You remember that the tomato is not indigenous to Europe—in fact, it was brought back to Europe by European explorers in the age of Columbus. And it is a food that, fresh and cooked, is found across Italian cooking. If you know a bit about gardening, you also know that tomatoes like the sunny, temperate climate characteristic of many parts of Italy and the Mediterranean more generally. So it can be grown easily and preserved easily through canning. In short, the tomato is not indigenous but extremely well adapted to the climate of its adoptive country.

4. **FFW #4** (1 minute): On the basis of what you have written so far, what would you like to know about your family food tradition? Who would you ask in order to learn more about your food, dish, or family food tradition? (Do you have an excellent cook in your extended family?)
5. Take ten minutes to go back and re-read all four FFWs. Organize them into a clear and specific presentation about your family's food culture. Make notes to help order your presentation.
6. Divide students into groups of three. Ask them to share their presentations about their family's food cultures to the other members of their small groups.

1) Focused Free Writing is a technique that helps to generate ideas through the movement of the hand. In a Focused Free Write, students respond to a prompt. This informal writing, and students need not worry about the completeness of ideas, style or grammar. When assigning a Focused Free Write, you want to remind students that they should continue writing for the full time; it is not possible to "be done" with a FFW! All or part of Focused Free Writes are generally shared, and should be read, word for word and without commentary.



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7. Then ask students to select one of those stories—the one that best engages with the history, ingredients, practices of their family’s food culture. In small groups, consider the story’s particular strengths. Then ask the groups to examine its least strong components and work to improve it.
8. Each group will share its story. Feel free to highlight really interesting points in each.
9. With about five minutes remaining: In closing, ask students for their thoughts on what they have heard.

Do they notice anything similar or different about the stories?

How do students feel when they talk or think about, or eat, foods from their cultures?

(What does a link to their cultures summon within them?)



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



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Sidney Mintz, Mary Douglas, Marvin Harris and many other scholars have shown that we eat our cultural history. That is, we eat foods that come, in part, from our cultural, ethnic, or national traditions. We may consume these foods on a daily basis, or they may be most apparent on holidays or other special occasions. Even when we don't consume those foods daily, studying them can reveal an interesting story about identity. Your job in this project is to explore your culinary cultural history, beginning with your own family kitchen and dinner table. (If you come from a multi-ethnic household, choose the tradition that is most present in your family meals.)

### DUE DATES

.....: Video interview due online. (see below)

.....: Annotated bibliography of print and Internet sources due in class. (Bibliography should include a correct Chicago Manual of Style bibliographic citation for each source and a 2-3 sentence annotation that concisely captures the value of each individual source.) [Replace citation reference if you use a different system.]

.....: 4-5 page essay due in class and on [turnitin.com](https://www.turnitin.com).

## Instructions

### I. Interview

As a first step, you will interview a local food expert: your mother, grandfather, aunt, cousin, neighbor. Select someone who knows your food tradition and cooks it well!

Set up a time for an interview. Use your phone, digital camera with video capabilities, or digital video camera to record your interview, or consider using and recording a Skype, FaceTime, or Facebook call if the person you would most like to interview does not live nearby.

Take a bit of time to set up the recording to avoid insufficient light, distracting background noise, or other conditions that will affect the quality of your video. Have a set of questions prepared in advance, and at hand. Your questions should consider the food tradition in general, as well as one or two foods or dishes that seem particularly important to the tradition or to your table. Feel free to use and modify these questions, and to give them to your interviewee in advance if you think it will enhance the conversation:

1. What is the food tradition you excel in and how would you describe it?
2. Why do we eat these foods?
3. When do we eat them? Are they part of daily life? Holidays? Why do we eat them at these moments?



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4. What particular foods are representative of this tradition? Why are these foods important?
5. Focus then on one or two ingredients or dishes:
  - Where does it come from? (Where is it grown? Where do we acquire it?)
  - How it is prepared? How many ways can it be prepared?
  - Who prepares this food?
  - When do we eat it—At a certain time of day? With a particular combination of foods? At certain moments of the year?
  - Why is the food/dish so important?

Never hesitate during the interview to ask follow-up questions that will clarify or enhance an answer. Work to make this interview a conversation, rather than simply a series of questions and answers, and learn as much as you can!

Upload your video—link will be sent via email.

### II. Research

Select one food or dish that came up in your interview for further exploration. In this research phase, your goal is to find sources that will enable you to learn more about the food, and to think about the significance and meaning(s) of your dish or ingredient.

1. Begin your research at home, in any cookbooks, hand-written recipes, or other collections you might find. What do these sources say about the food or dish—its origins, production, history, preparation?
2. Turn then to your school or local library. Do the books in their collection offer any additional information to your current knowledge of your subject food's production, history, or use?
3. Finally, turn to the Internet to continue your research. Be judicious about the sources you use and avoid Wikipedia except for its bibliographies. You'll need to justify the credibility of any Internet source you use, so please use the attached guide to help you choose your online sources carefully. Three or four excellent online sources should be adequate. [Your school may have a Wikipedia policy—if so, adapt accordingly!]



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### GAUGING THE CREDIBILITY OF AN INTERNET SOURCE

Choosing Internet sources wisely is a key part of developing your research skills. Never settle for the first site you find!

#### *How do you judge the quality of a source?*

1. Is the site current? How recently has it been updated? Select sites that are keeping up with new research or changing information.
2. Who is the author? Is the author qualified to write about this topic, and how do you know? Check for an “About Us” page to learn about the author. Be wary of a site that does not identify an author or whose author appears to have no credentials to write about that topic.
3. How accurate and objective is the site that you wish to use? This task is not easy; accuracy can be difficult to gauge.
  - Checking factual information with other sources is one good means to test your site for accuracy.
  - Listening for Point of View is another. While nearly every website will take a Point of View, avoid a site that expresses extremes, misconstrues data, or tries to deceive the reader. Determining whether the author cites current and reliable sources is important.
  - Consider whether the server that publishes the site a credible one? A Federal agencies (.gov), non-profits (.org), and colleges or universities (.edu) may help you find sites that offer research-based discussion.

### III. Cooking Research

Along with your library/online research, this assignment includes kitchen research. For this assignment, you need to observe and help in the cooking of your food (if an ingredient, one dish made from that ingredient; and if a dish, that dish).

Document your time in the kitchen with photos, preferably digital. Be sure to set aside a copy of the recipe you use (or to write down the recipe if the person you are assisting is not working from a written recipe). You will turn in a selection of photographs and that recipe as an appendix to your essay.

### IV. Analysis and Writing

Bring the results of your research together to examine it carefully. What can all of the information and ideas you have gathered tell us about the cultural meaning of the food you have chosen to examine, and the environmental, historical, or other context we need to understand that meaning? Consider your food and its place in the “language” of food and its meaning for those who prepare or consume it.



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## TASK: Video and Writing Assignment

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In your analysis, feel free to use anecdotes from your personal family experience, and from your video interview. Each claim, however, needs to be supported by other evidence as well, whether a print or digital source. This is an academic rather than simply personal essay.

Be sure that you have read and used carefully the attached course style guide.

