

# Herbivores, Carnivores, and Literavores: Argument and Appetite in the Classroom

*A high school teacher shares a food unit in which students study nonfiction books, articles, and videos on economic, environmental, and political aspects of food, and students create their own TEDTalk-style presentations, documentaries, or editorials in response.*

I've always been somewhat of a foodie. I share the Obamas' love of arugula and I regularly splurge on fresh and exotic seasonal fruits and vegetables (ramps, swiss chard, heirloom tomatoes) from my local farmers markets.

Students are also interested in food, which became apparent by their curiosity whenever they'd catch me sneaking a snack of, for example, raw almonds, kale chips, or freeze-dried edamame, from my bottom desk drawer between teaching periods. If only they had the same natural interest in *The Great Gatsby* that they have in the contents of my snack drawer.

And students aren't the only ones interested in food. In May 2012, for example, Congress was reexamining the Farm Bill, Michelle Obama was raising food and nutrition awareness for her Let's Move campaign, New York's Mayor Bloomberg proposed his soda ban on large drinks, and NPR featured daily stories about food.

## Nonfiction and Student Choice

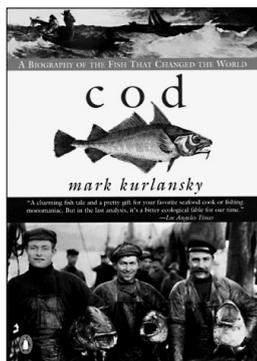
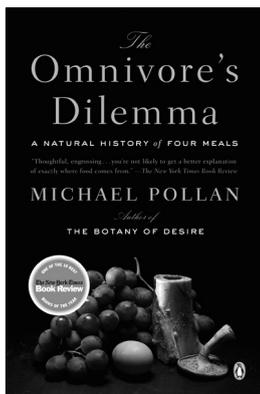
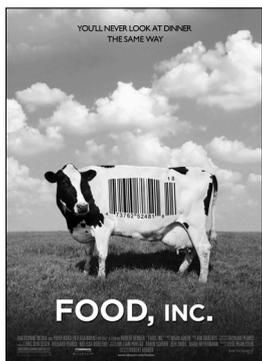
I was determined to find a way to use our shared love of food and the latest food news as the basis for teaching students the skills in my curriculum, and I playfully tossed around the idea of a food unit with my colleague, John. We knew students would be enthusiastic about eating some of their favorite foods in class. When I stumbled upon Trevor Corson's book, *The Secret Life of Lobsters: How Fishermen and Scientists Are Unraveling the Mysteries of Our Favorite Crustacean*, I was inspired by the ethnographic

approach to a single ingredient. I pictured students in my American Literature class uncovering the hidden stories behind their favorite foods and writing about them, combining some of the techniques they'd already used to write narratives, memoirs, and research papers. This was early 2011, and my department had just begun to discuss how the national movement toward incorporating more nonfiction texts in the English classroom might affect our curriculum.

My theory was that food as a genre would be inherently motivating to teenagers, and that through this irresistible content I could expose my students to sophisticated principles of rhetoric and argumentation—sort of like how Jessica Seinfeld sneaks chickpeas into chocolate chip cookies.

To gain assistance in my search for relevant texts about food, I started a discussion thread on the English Companion Ning. A few hours after posting my request for suggestions of food-related nonfiction texts, I had three pages of replies with dozens of suggested texts and activities.

So many texts jumped out at me to incorporate into the unit. I knew I wanted to share Eric Schlosser's documentary *Food, Inc.* as a core text, because the film provides an inside look at some key issues in the food industry. I was also inspired by former NCTE President Carol Jago's recommendation that all students read Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* and Mark Kurlansky's *Cod: A Biography of the Fish That Changed the World*. "These are books that develop stamina, and that's one of the reasons kids have trouble in college," Jago shared in a *U.S.*



*News and World Report* on college readiness (qtd. in Frey). I wanted to offer those texts and find others like them that students could use as resources for their own research. It was important to me that students access and use a physical book as part of their research, because I'd witnessed very few students taking advantage of the library's resources, and I wanted them to discover the richness and timeliness of nonfiction writing about food. When I shared these new resources and my enthusiasm with my colleague, John, he agreed to roll out the food unit in his sections of American Literature as well.

### Pre-work: Argumentation and Critical Inquiry

John suggested we use the food unit as a way to teach argumentation, and he envisioned a culminating project in which students make arguments about their favorite foods. Borrowing largely from one of the introductions to argumentation that I'd watched John perfect in his AP class, I familiarized students with the rhetorical triangle—the relationship between a text's speaker and audience and its rhetorical purpose—and principles of argumentation drawn from Aristotle: ethos, pathos, and logos. We used *Everything's an Argument* (Lunsford, Ruskiewicz, and Walters) to shape and supplement the discussion.

Once we discussed introductory concepts in rhetoric and argumentation, I asked the students to bring in a print advertisement to class. We examined how their chosen ads incorporated rhetorical appeals, who they believe the intended or target audiences were, and whether or not they found the text persuasive. These preliminary group dis-

cussions laid the groundwork for evaluating more sophisticated and complex texts that they'd encounter independently throughout the unit.

I introduced the food unit with a “pop quiz” on last night's dinner. The quiz included warm-up questions (e.g., What did you eat last night for dinner? Who prepared it? What ingredients were part of the dinner?) and more probing, in-

ingredient-specific questions that students tended to struggle with (e.g., How much did the ingredient cost? How and where was it produced? How was it transported? What are the political or social implications of this ingredient?). After the quiz, many students were surprised by how few answers they had to these basic questions about what they put in their bodies each day.

I explained that the project of this unit would be a critical inquiry that involves the examination of something familiar in a multifaceted, sophisticated way. We'd look at several dimensions of food, such as environmental, historical, nutritional, social, economic, and political factors. Their job, I told them, was to capture in their notebooks any new and interesting ideas that they would encounter, as well as to record their questions and areas of curiosity. I front-loaded this information in the unit because I believe for research to be authentic, students must discover and pursue a *genuine* interest.

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### Maple Bacon, Lobster Rolls, and PowerPoint Presentations

John and I began our food units concurrently in the spring of 2011. As we'd hoped, the students were riveted by *Food, Inc.* and were able to confidently evaluate the film's arguments using the rhetorical terms we introduced. Not only were students becoming fluent in Aristotelian terminology, but they were also thinking critically about their own real-world decisions. One student arrived early to class to privately confess, “Ms. G, last night, no one was

home . . . I opened the freezer, and I found a huge package of Purdue chicken . . . and I threw it out!” My goal was not to turn my students into vegetarians, but to encourage them to think critically about their food choices. Students are always surprised to learn that despite all my research about the food industry, I remain sparingly carnivorous.

I exposed students to several arguments about food with multiple genres of media. For their first homework assignment, I asked students to watch and take notes on their choice of two, food-related TEDTalks (“TED: Ideas Worth Spreading”). By pointing students to resources such as TEDTalks, I hoped to share with them an authentic way I’ve seen adults enjoy learning. After I gave them a little bit of background information about TED as a forum for interdisciplinary thinking and a quick preview of the website in class, they selected and watched two food-related videos for homework. Although at the time I wasn’t familiar with the terminology, I essentially “flipped the classroom” so that the next day in class, students could report back to their classmates about their findings. As I’d hoped, students enjoyed the TEDTalks and several watched additional videos on a variety of non-food-related topics. Many of them boasted that they had downloaded the free TED app to watch videos on their phones.

Armed with inspiration from the film, the videos, and a few articles I’d shared, the students conducted research in teams of two or three. Their assignment was to research a single food of their choice in depth using the food books in the library, our school’s databases, a list of websites I’d pre-selected, and other resources on the Internet that they deemed reputable. I reminded students to keep track of their sources in any way they found convenient. Each student was responsible for sharing a unique argument about their ingredient with the class and for bringing in food samples for the class. (Before the presentation days, I double-checked my documentation for students’ food allergies and received permission from my supervisor to have food in class.)

The students’ final presentations were not unlike the ones I imagine they’d given many times before: They took turns reading full sentences off of PowerPoint slides or index cards in disinter-

ested voices. However, they enthusiastically shared samples of the ingredients they discussed as part of their presentations. One memorable team prepared lobster rolls in front of the class, and my colleagues still reminisce about John’s students’ maple syrup-covered bacon strips that found their way to our department office. When John and I spent several days flurrying in and out of the department office with leftovers, I got the sense that many of our colleagues may have wondered about the relevance or rigor of our food unit.

Although students learned a great deal from the whole-class texts and their research, their presentations fell short of our hopes. It was clear that many students were overwhelmed by the volume of information they’d discovered on their food, and they opted simply to list facts they’d found. Students seemed puzzled by our instructions to “make a single argument about your food” and often resorted to bland thesis statements, such as, “Even though chicken wings are bad for you, you should eat them anyway because they’re delicious”; or worse, they didn’t make any argument at all and simply presented slide after slide of general information. While our choices of nonfiction texts for the food unit were plentiful and engaging, obviously we hadn’t provided enough guidance for the presentations.

### Refining the Unit, Expanding Student Choice

The following year, I was determined to find more success with the food unit. The new Regional Director of Curriculum and Instruction, Brad Siegel, heard about my food unit and asked if he could observe and co-teach a few lessons with me.

In a planning meeting with Brad, I was candid about my disappointment with the previous year’s presentations. It was obvious to Brad that the different formats I exposed my students to could serve as models for them to present their own arguments in more interesting ways. Brad suggested I allow students the option of presenting their own TEDTalk-style speech (in lieu of a PowerPoint presentation), produce their own short documentary (modeled after *Food, Inc.*), or write an editorial (modeled after Lisa Miller’s *Newsweek* article,

“Divided We Eat: What Food Says about Class in America and How to Bridge the Gap.” Even though I was worried at first that these changes might be too ambitious, this expansion of options for student presentations dramatically improved the unit and encouraged students to express their arguments with enthusiasm and creativity.

I began the second year of the food unit with the same introductory work. Over the summer, the librarian had generously stocked the library with even more books on food, so when it came time to start the unit in the spring, I marched my classes down to the library to show them some options. At the end of my book talk, which involved gathering students in a tight huddle around the cart of books I’d preselected, one of the quietest students, Corey, grabbed Kurlansky’s *Cod* book. I asked him if he was thinking about researching fish, and he told me, “I was hoping to research sustainable fish farms like the ones I learned about in the TEDTalk I watched.” I beamed with pride that he had found a topic that inspired him, and I offered him a second text, *Four Fish: The Future of the Last Wild Food* (Greenberg), as an additional resource. The idea of giving book talks and matching specific students to books used to feel like something for elementary or middle school to me, but it was so fulfilling to be able to connect students to texts that matched their level and area of interest.

I also loosened the restrictions on what students could research, as opposed to requiring them to focus on one ingredient. Corey didn’t want to research a specific fish but instead wanted to look into the way fish are farmed. Another student wanted to research GMOs (genetically modified organisms). Several students wanted to research water. And I allowed students to research foods that contained multiple ingredients, such as the Big Mac, instead of requiring that they study one component (e.g., beef). I originally thought it would be easier to study an ingredient or industry, but I later realized this restriction was an artificial one, preventing students from studying foods that genuinely intrigued them.

After two weeks of research, Corey chose to present his findings in a “TEDTalk.” He had never really spoken in front of the class—he was the kind of student who never volunteered unless

called on, and he remained in the background during group work—but this format left him exposed. His topic of sustainable fish farming did not garner as much initial interest from the audience as some of his classmates’ more immediately exciting topics, such as energy drinks and Nutella, but his presentation was a hit. Corey began by flashing his title, “Viva la Palma,” as the first slide. A student questioned, “What’s that mean?” and Corey replied back with a smirk, “That’s just to hook you in.” After revealing an image of fish as his next slide, students chuckled at Corey’s joke and were immediately engaged. Using his research from TED.com, the Internet, and several books and articles, Corey presented himself as a dynamic and entertaining speaker and an expert on Spain’s Veta la Palma fish farm. He argued that Veta la Palma should serve as a model for the way we catch fish in the United States. Impressively, Corey stuck to my instructions and limited his use of text on his slides. Like a TED speaker, Corey gave his speech from memory, interacted with the audience, and used images and slides simply to support his argument with strong visuals. This was really Corey’s breakout moment in English class.

I realized, the second year, that if the students’ arguments were rich enough, the class did not need to be bribed with food samples to pay attention, so I removed the requirement. During the presentations, instead of snacking, students were instructed to take notes on the speaker’s thesis and use of rhetorical appeals, and to jot down any questions they thought of during the presentation. This year’s presentations seemed to fly by, and the students’ questions extended well beyond the time I’d allotted for each presenter. By pushing students to think in new ways and present in innovative formats, I enabled them to reach deeper meanings.

### Opportunities for Student Activism

By a stroke of luck, just a few weeks before I was gearing up to begin the food unit again this year, I caught the Food Channel’s first airing of Bill Shore’s documentary, *Hunger Hits Home*, associated with the No Kid Hungry Campaign. I knew I had to incorporate the film into my unit because it

profiles families and children around America that suffer from hunger. The students were shocked to learn that there are hungry people in every community in America, and they could not believe that so many children who are eligible for social services go hungry. Several of my students criticized *Food, Inc.* for presenting so many problems but not enough solutions. After viewing *Hunger Hits Home*, students expressed frustration and a desire to help, but many did not know where to start.

#### RECOMMENDED TEXTS FOR A FOOD UNIT

Bitman, Mark. "Part I: Food Matters." *Food Matters: A Guide to Conscious Eating with More Than 75 Recipes*. New York: Simon, 2009. Print. [The introduction and first half of the book are useful in the classroom; the second half includes recipes.]

*Food, Inc.* Dir. Robert Kenner. Prod. Robert Kenner and Elise Pearlstein. Participant Media, 2009. DVD.

Honoré, Carl. "Food: Turning the Tables on Speed." *In Praise of Slowness: Challenging the Cult of Speed*. San Francisco: Harper, 2005. 53–84. Print.

*Hunger Hits Home*. Dir. Dan Cutforth and Jane Lipsitz. Prod. Kris Lindquist and Alexandra Lipsitz. Television Food Network, G.P., 2012.

Miller, James S. "How We Eat." *Acting Out Culture: Reading and Writing*. Boston: Bedford, 2011. 179–276. Print. [The opening to this chapter is a great way to introduce students to the complexity of food as a subject for critical inquiry.]

Miller, Lisa. "Divided We Eat: What Food Says about Class in America and How to Bridge the Gap." *Newsweek* 2010: 42–48. Print.

Nestle, Marion. *Food Politics: How the Food Industry Influences Nutrition and Health*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2002. Print.

Pollan, Michael. *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*. New York: Penguin, 2006. Print. [My library also has the *Young Readers Edition*, which is good for students who cannot read the full version.]

*The Salt*. NPR. Web. 17 Apr. 2013. <<http://www.npr.org/blogs/thesalt/>>.

*Tapped*. Dir. Jason Lindsey and Stephanie Soechtig. Prod. Sarah Gibson, Stephanie Soechtig, Michael Walrath, and Michelle Walrath. Atlas Films, 2009.

"TED: Ideas Worth Spreading." Web. 17 Apr. 2013. <<http://www.ted.com>>. [Search by tag for "Food."]

By a second stroke of luck, I received a postcard for the National Association of Letter Carriers' Stamp Out Hunger Food Drive while I was in the midst of showing *Food, Inc.* to my classes. It turned out that my food unit coincided with the country's largest and most convenient annual food drive, in which anyone can simply leave nonperishable items at one's mailbox to be delivered by post office employees to nearby food pantries (<http://helpstampouthunger.com>). I showed students the Stamp Out Hunger Facebook page and encouraged them to post the information on their walls. It was gratifying to empower students to raise awareness about issues that inspired them, and they seemed pleased to find the outside world intersecting with what they expected to be more formal, isolated classroom learning.

Former students still come back and ask about the food unit—a first-year college student wrote me the other day to tell me that she's taking an Eating in America seminar class and sharing some of her high school research with her professor and classmates. She is even considering declaring nutrition as her major.

I never could have predicted back when I was studying *Beowulf* in college that I'd be teaching my high school students how to research the politics of the Big Mac. But I'm grateful that our profession allows us to use unexpected content and methods to engage students and challenge them to think in new ways. While the traditional canon continues to have its place in high school English curricula, the addition of nonfiction and informational texts on contemporary issues cultivates skills students need to function as critical thinkers. 

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**Lauren Goldberg** is entering her seventh year of teaching English at Northern Highlands Regional High School in Allendale, New Jersey. She is pursuing a doctorate through the Contemporary Learning and Interdisciplinary Research (CLAIR) program at Fordham University. Email her at [lgoldberg9@fordham.edu](mailto:lgoldberg9@fordham.edu).

### READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

"Grocery Store Scavenger Hunt: Researching Nutrition to Advertise for Health" from ReadWriteThink.org is designed to make students aware of what they eat and how food companies use the media to market their products. Students begin by going on a scavenger hunt to learn about their favorite foods. From there, they learn nutrition terminology through a Web-based research assignment. Equipped with information about the foods they eat, students analyze the food advertisements they see to learn how companies market their products to specific audiences. In the final section of this lesson, students choose healthful foods and work in cooperative groups to create advertisements for them. <http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/grocery-store-scavenger-hunt-1140.html>

## Hummingbird Magnificat

Oh hummer in sunny honeysuckle,  
 how you shine your sheeny green  
*(broad-billed, black-chinned)*  
 your hustle bustle blossom to blossom,  
 lick that honey hummer  
*(ruby throat, violet crown)*  
 I can almost hear the flurry  
 backward, forward, upside down  
 you flit, all jazz, you zigzag,  
 straddle, shuttle, jive  
*(blues-throated, buff bellied, Cuban Emerald)*  
 air thick under eaves  
 with stunning humming  
*(white-eared, Magnificent-ly)*  
 gorged with sunny honey.

—Nancy Krim  
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**Nancy Krim**, incoming poetry editor for *English Journal*, is a working poet, silversmith, and rustic woodworker. She had a long career teaching secondary English at Scarsdale High School. She holds degrees from Stanford University and Warren Wilson College (MFA in poetry). She has published poems and articles in numerous journals over the years, and now uses silver, stone, and wood to make art. Email her at [nckrim6M@gmail.com](mailto:nckrim6M@gmail.com).