

Food and Its Influence **An Essay Assignment**

Topic. Write an essay in which you show how food—its production, preparation, and/or consumption—affects everyday life beyond its obvious role as one of the basic necessities; that is, try to explore in your essay the cultural, psychological, and social influences of food on you and those around you. For example, explain how your childhood was defined by the constant struggle between you and your parents to get you to eat healthy foods; or describe the most elaborate meal that you have ever eaten, perhaps at a fancy restaurant, and how it made you feel. Also, you might relate your first experiences with growing a garden and enjoying fresh vegetables or catching and cooking your own fish on a camping trip. If your family still maintains its ethnic origins by preparing food from the old country, you might use your essay to describe such a meal and how it connects you to your roots. This is not a process analysis paper on how to prepare a certain dish; instead, you should use your essay to interpret the meaning of food in your own life and culture.

Audience and Purpose. Food is a necessity for life, but it is so much more than that. It is used in social settings to help members of a group bond and to make parties festive; it is used to pass from generation to generation family and national customs; it is used to make friends and observe special occasions; and it is used to express artistic values of those who prepare it for consumption. Writing about the role of food in our lives can teach us much about ourselves and our culture. Interpreting the meaning of food in our lives can help readers understand life in general.

Development Strategy. To develop this kind of personal essay, use division/classification (like the sample essay), comparison/contrast, or narration/description. Begin by brainstorming some interesting experiences you have had with food, and make a list of potential topics. Try to list eight or ten topics, and then choose the one that seems the most interesting. To test drive this topic, do some free writing for five or ten minutes to see what you have to say. If this results in some interesting material, try some focused free writing in which you use a specific strategy, such as narration or comparison/contrast, to organize your thoughts. If this results in a detailed, creative look at the art of eating okra or why your Cajun grandmother used food as bribery, try writing a thesis (main idea sentence) that will help you shape the first draft into a purposeful, coherent essay. If this works, share your first draft with a preliminary audience before writing a final draft. Develop your topic with specific supporting material from personal experiences and use sensory language to help readers experience the food you describe.

Sample Topics

my first experience with haute cuisine at the Commander's Palace Restaurant in New Orleans
learning to like liver
watching my little brothers eat dinner: not a pretty sight
dining on exotic foods during a mission trip to the Caribbean
how my mother cooks for six very different people without going crazy
why breakfast foods are my favorite
on refusing to eat anything slimy
fresh vegetables from my grandparents' garden: the ultimate in dining pleasure
grilling the steaks as a manly act: how to wear an apron and still look macho
on learning proper table etiquette during the potluck suppers held at church
the cultural significance of _____ cuisine
in quest of the perfect junk food
on the importance of not letting your foods touch each other on the plate: confessions of an obsessive/compulsive
vegetarianism: not a disease
on saying grace before a meal
Aunt Virginia's secret weapon, the best fried fruit pies you've ever eaten
a total sensory experience: observing the kitchen on a busy night at Tavern on the Green
putting the soul into soul food
why Thanksgiving dinner is more than a meal at the Salvation Army
one of God's most amazing inventions, the sweet potato

Sample Thesis Statements

1. Passover is more than just a meal; it is a religious experience rich in symbolism and history.
2. Preparing a family dinner for the first time can easily turn into disaster.
3. Al fresco dining at the Catalina Restaurant in St. Augustine involves all of the senses.
4. The parents of finicky children have to be resourceful when tricking their kids into eating enough to stay alive.
5. People eat out of necessity but also as an important form of social interaction.

Sample Essay

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Eating as a Social Act

Can you imagine a party without food? Have you ever bellied up to the buffet, even though you were already full, just to be sociable? Does the act of breaking bread with someone with whom you're angry ease the tension? Is it easy to be quiet at a dinner party? If you answered no-yes-yes-no to these questions, you have probably noticed the social implications of eating. Yes, we eat to stay alive, but there's much more to it than that. We eat with others to establish and maintain friendly relationships. Four main occasions illustrate this social reason for eating: parties, banquets, family meals, and funerals.

By definition, a party involves more than one person and almost always includes food and beverage. My mom's birthday party last August wouldn't have been the same without the birthday cake, the homemade ice cream, and the large trays of finger foods that her two sisters prepared for friends and family. The focus remained on my mother, but the delicious food gave us something to do while she opened her gifts and joked with her sisters.

A banquet is usually a catered affair at which a large group of people who are bound together by a special interest or endeavor sit down to a dinner to honor a person or persons who have contributed to their shared interest or cause during the year. The high school sports banquet last year gave athletes and their families a wonderful opportunity to form social bonds by reminiscing about the year's games and track meets over filet mignon, baked potatoes, and green beans. Recognizing the outstanding athletes with short speeches and awards also created a social cohesion in the group that have made this year's teams perform well.

Family meals also perform an important social function when parents use these occasions to teach their children proper table etiquette, find out what's going on in their children's lives, and entertain interesting guests who can expose the children to new ideas and different cultures. My parents expect me and my two sisters to be present at every family meal, and some of our most enjoyable times as a family have taken place around the dinner table. We also have some interesting discussions about politics, religion, and culture, especially if we have guests like our pastor and his wife, the Muslim family that lives down the street, or any of the international students from the university where my mother works. I have learned my conversational skills sitting at the family dinner table.

Food also has a social function at most funerals or wakes. When my grandfather passed away two years ago, I was amazed at how much food poured in from neighbors and fellow church members. This was their way of saying, "We care about your loss." During the home visitation time the night before the funeral, my grandmother made sure everyone had something to eat. After the funeral the next morning, the church ladies prepared a nice lunch for family and friends in the church's fellowship hall. We used this occasion to share memories about Grandpa. Our dinner that night at Grandma's house became a kind of impromptu family reunion when we caught up on all the news from aunts, uncles, and cousins who came in from out of state to attend the funeral.

Of course, there are other occasions when eating together helps us form social bonds, but these are the ones that have helped me become the person I am today. Bottom line: people eat out of necessity but also as an important form of social interaction.

Essay Reminders. Don't forget: 1) a good essay consists of three basic parts: the introduction, the body, and the conclusion; 2) the main idea is stated clearly in one sentence called the thesis; 3) the topic is narrow and well developed; 4) the author writes about the topic from personal experience for an audience of readers who will benefit in some way from reading it; 5) the material is divided into paragraphs logically to make reading the essay easy; and 6) the topic is developed specifically, using one or more of the following development strategies: analogy, definition, description, cause/effect, comparison/contrast, division/classification, examples, narration, and process analysis.