

The image is a composite of two photographs. The left photograph shows a white rectangular tray with three compartments containing different types of tea leaves: one with dark, rolled leaves, one with lighter, needle-like leaves, and one with green, twisted leaves. The right photograph shows a traditional Chinese tea set on a bamboo tray, including a large reddish-brown teapot, a smaller teapot, and a cup filled with yellow tea. The entire graphic is set against a dark green background with a light-colored, textured border.

EVERYONE'S CUP OF TEA

The Case for Food Writing as WAC Catalyst

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Introduction

For the past couple years, I have taught various writing classes themed on food. My own interests involve writing about food and our discourse surrounding food accessibility and security, so I thought I would expose my students to some of the ways we encounter food in writing. The universality of the topic appealed to me because I thought that flexibility would also appeal to my students. With this theme, I've engaged students in creative nonfiction courses, basic writing courses, and first year composition courses. In each circumstance, most students have admitted a sense of satisfaction with the topic, regardless of their major disciplinary fields. This led me to believe that food writing is unique as a topic for a first year writing course in that it can serve as a model for using specific content that will promote skills transfer (a major goal in WAC philosophy).

TED Ideas worth spreading

WATCH DISCOVER ATTEND PARTICIPATE ABOUT LOGIN

James Oliver
Teach every child about food

17:08 11:17 11:17:00
 11:17:00 11:17:00
 11:17:00 11:17:00

The Traveling Onion
 Naomi Shihab Nye, 1952

"It is believed that the onion originally came from India. In Egypt it was an object of worship—why I haven't been able to find out. From Egypt the onion entered Greece and on to Italy, thence into all of Europe." — Better Living Cookbook

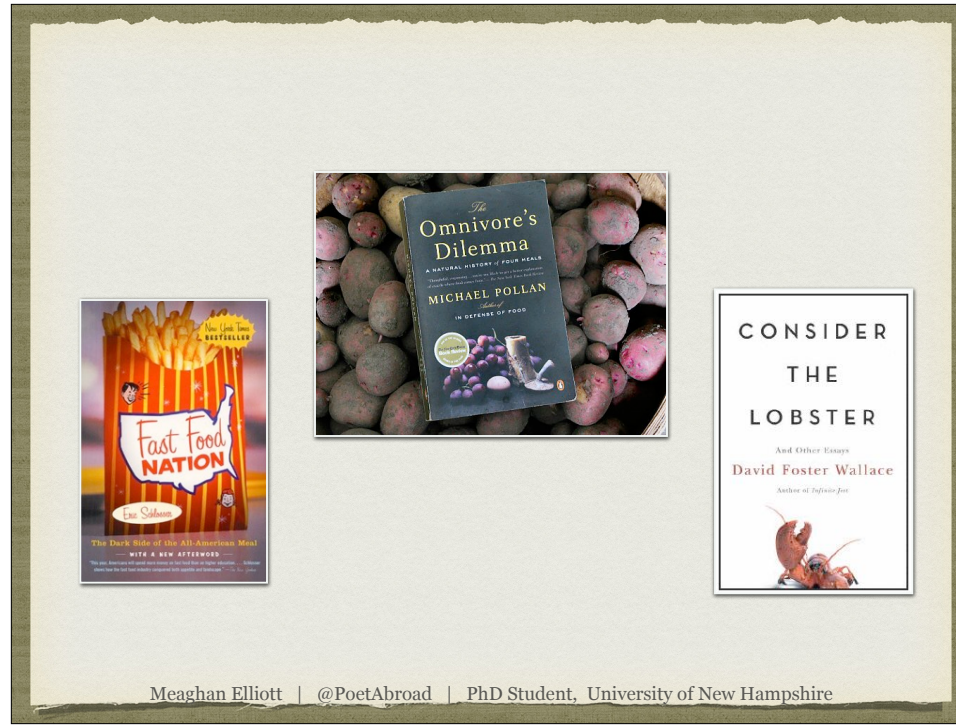
When I think how far the onion has traveled
 just to enter my stew today, I could kneel and praise
 all small forgotten miracles,
 crackly paper peeling on the drainboard,
 pearly layers in smooth agreement,
 the way the knife enters onion
 and onion falls apart on the chopping block,
 a history revealed.
 And I would never scold the onion
 for causing tears.
 It is right that tears fall
 for something small and forgotten.
 How at meal, we sit to eat,
 commenting on texture of meat or herbal aroma
 but never on the translucence of onion,
 now limp, now divided,
 or its traditionally honorable career:
 For the sake of others,
 disappear.

CHOPPED

my name is yeh

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In each of these courses, I've introduced various types or genres of food writing and composition—TED talks on food, food poems, essays on ethical or political food issues, episodes of food-related television programs, and even food blogs. In fact, food blogs offer a great opportunity for students to engage with multimodal writing styles. They see examples of photo journalism, web design, video embedding, audience-participation and conversational discourse from comments sections. Students analyze these texts and view them as multi-dimensional, as a broadened spectrum of options for their own writing choices.



In the fall of 2015, I again taught a first year writing course with this food theme. Throughout the term, students wrote daily responses to readings about food, like Michael Pollan's title chapter from his popular book *Omnivore's Dilemma*, David Foster Wallace's narrative essay "Consider the Lobster," Eric Schlosser's research article on "Why McDonald's Fries Taste So Good," or bell hooks' reflection in "Touching the Earth" about the African-American relationship to land. Each of these readings gave students different material, different content, and different writing approaches to the same general topic.

FIRST YEAR WRITING ASSIGNMENTS FOR FOOD THEME

- restaurant review
- rhetorical analysis
- researched persuasive essay
- personal food narrative



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Students wrote four major paper assignments that somehow related to our food theme: a restaurant review, an analysis paper, a researched persuasive essay, and a personal narrative.

Food Writing Questionnaire

1. When you first found out the topic of this course, what was your reaction?
2. Did you ever feel negatively limited by the focus of the food theme in this course? If so, please explain.
3. Did you find that the focus of the course made it easier for you to come up with ideas to write about? Can you give an example?
4. Were there any readings you remember as being particularly helpful or interesting? Why?
5. Were there any readings you remember as being particularly unhelpful? Why?
6. What is one thing you learned about food in this course that stands out to you? (if you can think of more than one, please feel free to share)
7. Have you learned anything in this class that you feel will be applicable elsewhere (either in another class or in your everyday life)? Whatever your answer, please explain.
8. Is there anything else you would like to add or share about the theme of food in a first year writing course that you haven't mentioned here yet?

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At the end of the semester, students were then given an IRB-approved eight-question survey (distributed by a third party) about how they responded to the food theme in this course. This talk discusses specific results of that survey and makes observations about how many student responses corroborate my claim that food writing acts as an excellent catalyst for WAC goals. Specifically, I showcase how this theme opens up avenues to teaching for transfer, which, incidentally, is a prominent objective in first year writing.

Food writing is a universal subject that acts as one of the most inclusive topics available to classrooms. Everyone needs to eat. And even those who chose not to or have some form of dietary restriction or limitation can be included in this (what I call “food in the negative”). I tell students that, even if they consider themselves picky eaters, they already have a writing topic at their finger tips. In the first year writing course, their researched persuasive essay is an assignment where students are asked to write a research paper on a topic to do with food that is embedded in their area of interest. Students choose to investigate food in their fields, ranging from business, history, and psychology, to agriculture, anthropology, health, and biology, etc. By understanding how food takes part in writing across the curriculum, students begin to see how their own backgrounds and cultural histories with food can engage in that transfer represented in food writing. No matter their discipline, students find a way of identifying with the topic of food and find new and exploratory ways of writing about it within their own field of study.

WAC is uniquely defined by its pedagogy. Indeed, one might say that WAC, more than any other recent educational reform movement, has aimed at transforming pedagogy at the college level, at moving away from the lecture mode of teaching (the “delivery of information” model) to a model of active student engagement with the material and with the genres of the discipline through writing, not just in English classes but in all classes across the university.



WAC for the New Millenium, Susan McLeod and Eric Miraglia

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Theory

In the introductory chapter to the collection, *WAC for the New Millenium*, Susan McLeod and Eric Miraglia provide a brief glimpse into what each chapter in the book will cover. In it, they write that:

WAC is uniquely defined by its pedagogy. Indeed, one might say that WAC, more than any other recent educational reform movement, has aimed at transforming pedagogy at the college level, at moving away from the lecture mode of teaching (the “delivery of information” model) to a model of active student engagement with the material and with the genres of the discipline through writing, not just in English classes but in all classes across the university. (5)

This also speaks to the peer tutoring programs also discussed in this book (chapter 9, which I don’t get into in this paper, due to time constraints) in that, as the authors say, “students can learn from each other as well as from teachers and books” (15) following the idea that learning can hardly happen in a vacuum and that students gain more from a collective discovered-knowledge than they do from learning on their own. What better way to bring a class together as its own community than by “feeding” them a topic every community understands.

Where freshman composition might focus on teaching the general features of what we term ‘academic discourse,’ WAC focuses not on writing skills per se, but on teaching both the content of the discipline and the particular discourse features used in writing about that content.



Susan McLeod, "Pedagogy of Writing Across the Curriculum"

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I also draw on Susan McLeod's "Pedagogy of Writing Across the Curriculum" by offering that, where using the food theme breaks away from the common first year composition course and more toward a general WAC theory is that, "Where freshman composition might focus on teaching the general features of what we term 'academic discourse,' WAC focuses not on writing skills per se, but on teaching both the content of the discipline and the particular discourse features used in writing about that content" (54). In other words, for the purposes of my paper, I would argue that the food theme turns the typical first year writing course into a WAC course by using a content-specific theme to engage students according to their own disciplines, and that it is able to do so because of the universal nature of its subject. What the food theme does is offer ways for students to view the content in a variety of contexts. In essence, it gives them exposure to different genres. By doing research from perspectives in their discipline, they get to see what writing about food is like in their area of interest. A student in the business school might be interested in writing about labels and marketing; a psychology major might want to look at the emotional reasons we binge eat, etc. But even if they chose not to do discipline-specific work, they would still get exposure to different genres and different disciplines by engaging in the readings provided, and reading the work of their peers.

In a food-themed FYW course, we not only teach students the writing skills that are intended to transfer to other disciplines, but we give students the ability to apply that transfer immediately by using content that can conveniently mold into their interests. Therefore, the skills we aim in teaching for transfer are immediately accessible for students in the class, rather than something that has to be tested later, after the student has completed the FYW course and wants to apply those skills in another course at another time.



Methods

My initial design in drafting questions for the survey I wanted to administer was to create questions that were somewhat open-ended, in order to allow for nuanced response from students. The survey generally asks about the students' overall reactions to the theme, prompting them with issues such as limitation, flexibility to select topics to write about, and general take-aways from their experience with the course. (See Appendix A for the original questionnaire). After obtaining IRB approval of this survey, a third party not affiliated with my class or students in any way administered the survey on the last day of classes in the semester. Out of twenty-four students in the class, twenty-one participated in the survey. The demographic make-up of an average UNH FYW classroom is mostly white, traditional students (ages 18-22), native English speakers. This was the case with my students, as well. It should be noted that the survey was anonymous, strictly promoted as such, and did not require students to self-identify in anyway. There were several students, however, who chose to provide answers that made them distinguishable to me in small ways. One student, for instance, made mention of her newly-declared major (as a result of the food theme, she decided to become a dual eco-gastronomy major). Since she was the only student in the class who had declared this major, her identity was made clear from her response.

From the responses to this survey, I was able to identify thematic patterns that developed into codes across the entire questionnaire. (See Appendix B for the full coding chart). My first read through of the data was not particularly focused, as I was looking for any themes and patterns that jumped out at me. I opened myself up to whatever themes seemed to emerge, even if that

CODING EXAMPLES

- **AR (approachability)**

student either indicates personal investment in the topic or agrees with the relatable nature or approachability of the topic

- “knowing [the class] would be about something I love made me less worried”
- “food is something everyone can relate to and connect about”
- “everyone eats food, so everyone can relate”

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For example, the “approachability” code (AR) was taken from a couple of students talking about how the food theme content was relatable. You can see excerpts from some of those responses here. However, the majority of the codes I came up with were more generalizable terms and phrases,

CODING EXAMPLES

- AT (academic transfer)

student makes clear reference to academic skills transfer (academic only)

- NAT (nonacademic transfer)

student makes clear reference to non-academic skills transfer (or makes clear distinction between academic and non-academic transfer)

- “This class has made me a better writer and I will use that in all my other classes [AT] and in everyday life [NAT].”

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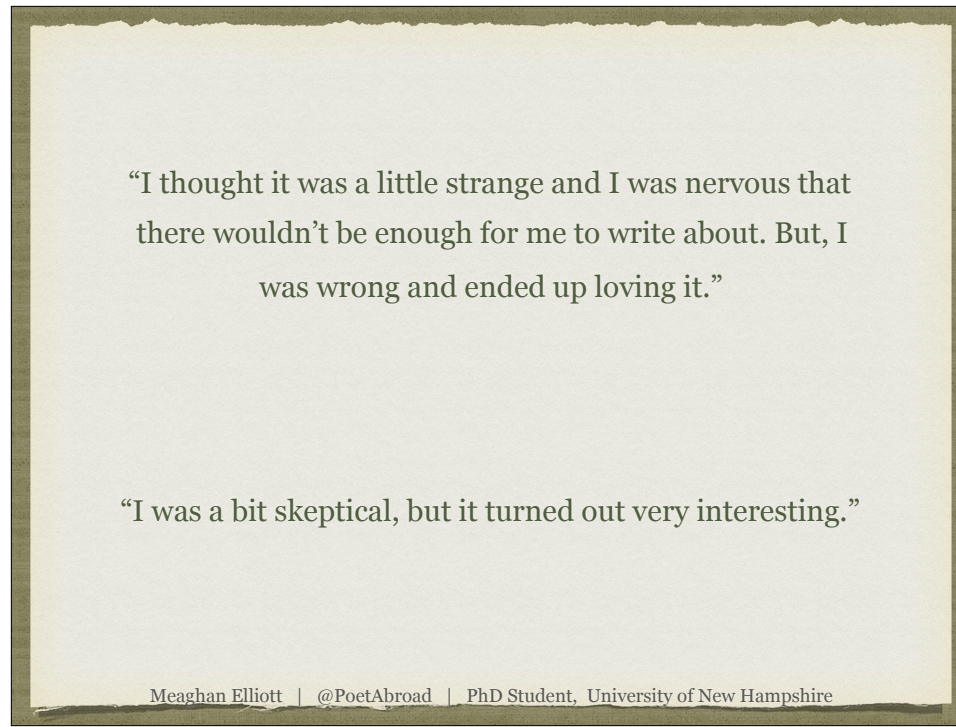
such as “nonacademic transfer” (code: NAT) or “academic transfer” (code: AT), language not used in my students’ responses. For instance, a student response coded for both academic and non-academic transfer reads: “This class has made me a better writer and I will use that in all my other classes [AT] and in everyday life [NAT].” This student clearly sees a distinction, and explicitly separated the two.

I went back and forth between this thematic code and a more quantifiable data pattern, where I looked at the result through the lens of content analysis (how many students responded positively in question one, how many students left question 4 or 5 blank, etc.). For this method, I relied on content analysis and applying Jack Selzer’s definition of textual and contextual analysis from his chapter in *What Writing Does and How It Does It* (2004). (See Appendix C for quantifiable content analysis data).

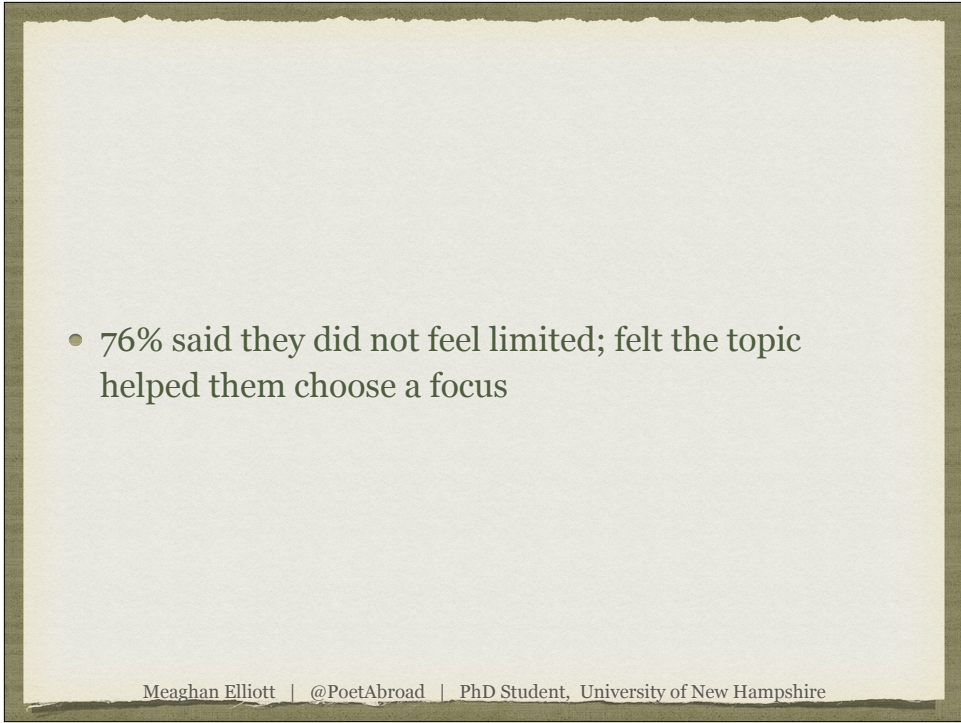
Findings

I discovered an overlap in responses that suggest overall success in applying a food theme to a first year writing course and responses that showcase students’ ability to transfer skills from the FYW course to either other courses and/or non-academic writing activities. This overlap is the crux of my argument, in that it identifies food writing as a WAC catalyst—a common topic that both engages students in college writing skills and gives them the opportunity to apply that topic to their own specific disciplinary interests. I must acknowledge, however, the initial difficulties in separating the codes as individual entities simply because of this overlap—the food theme and WAC are constantly interacting anyway, as students seem to intuitively indicate in their responses.

In general, I was pleased to see an average success rate with the theme. Most students indicated a positive experience and had some great takeaways from the course. In fact, many of them (eight, to be precise) used the word “excited” when describing their first reactions to learning about the topic of the class.



For those who did not have a positive experience, students either felt confused, unsure, or skeptical, or indicated that their perspective changed over the course of the semester (see code: RS in Appendix B). One student whose reaction shifted wrote that "I thought it was a little strange and I was nervous that there wouldn't be enough for me to write about. But, I was wrong and ended up loving it." Another student commented, "I was a bit skeptical, but it turned out very interesting."

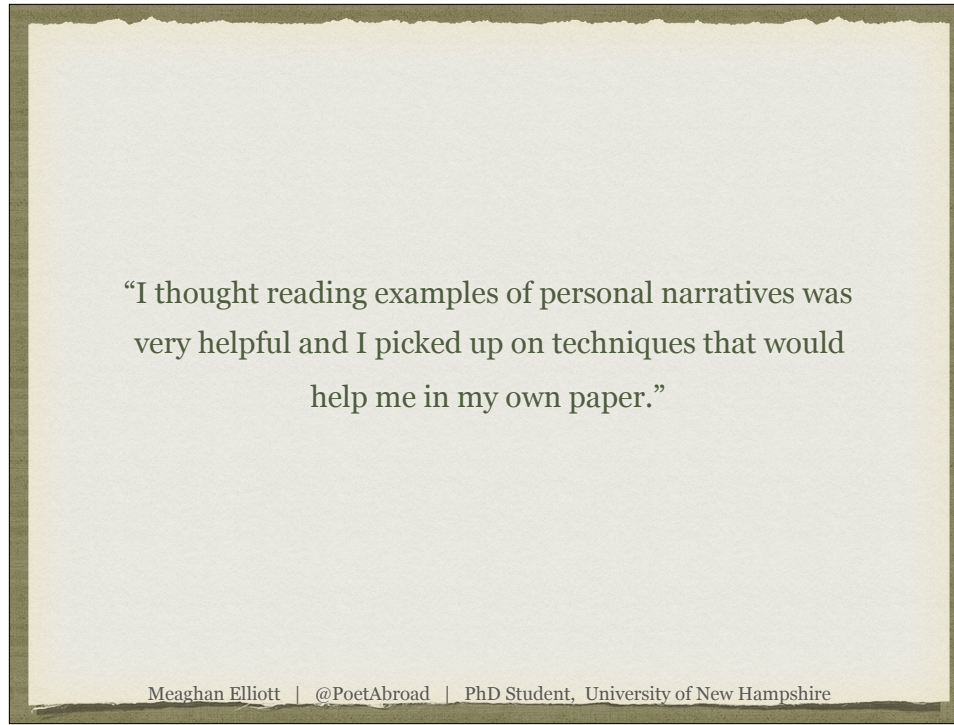
- 
- 76% said they did not feel limited; felt the topic helped them choose a focus

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On Limitation

Some of that skepticism came from being unsure whether the focus would be limiting to them, which is why the second question in the survey specifically addresses that concern. The majority of students (sixteen out of twenty-one) did not feel limited and, in fact, believed that the topic helped them in choosing a focus for their papers and essays in the course (see question three in Appendix A). With this, a few students identified specific papers that this applied to—the researched persuasive essay being the most frequently mentioned (by eight students). Because this essay assignment was specifically designed to engage students in researching food within the realm of their own interests and majors, I find it encouraging to note that this was a positive experience for them. My intention in designing the persuasive paper this way was that the readings they would find when researching their preferred topic will most likely be writing that exists in their discipline, thereby providing them with models for what writing in their discipline looks like.

Similarly, in looking at the results from questions four and five (questions that ask about how helpful/unhelpful the readings were), my hope was that the readings I provided for them were varied enough for them to see the extent to which the styles can vary across the curriculum. They may see examples from their field, but they will also see examples from other fields, which provides them a more rounded idea of the variety of writing genres and conventions from discipline to discipline. The students who reacted negatively to some of the readings mostly did so on the grounds that they were “bored” by certain pieces. However, most were able to identify readings that were in some way useful.



For instance, some students specifically pointed to readings that helped them understand the genre they were to write in for their next assignment. One student wrote: "I thought reading examples of personal narratives was very helpful and I picked up on techniques that would help me in my own paper." Many others indicated that their favorite readings were the ones that were most relatable or approachable (see code AR).

How Universal Topics Open Pathways for Transfer

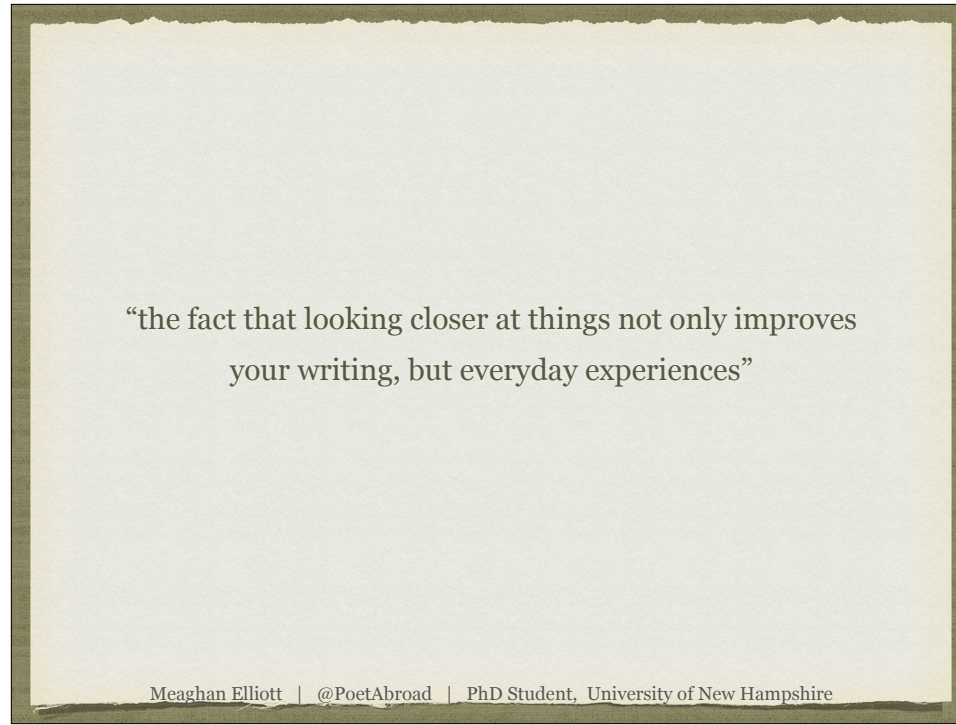
It speaks volumes to me that there were no students who left question six unanswered. This question asked specifically for students to think of at least one thing they learned about food over the course of the semester. Many of them said they realized how flexible a topic it was, or how it related to so many different fields of study and interest.

- “the connection that food has to pretty much everything”
- “different cultures and ways food can be used to express oneself and your family”
- “food is more then [sic] just eating, food can mean a lot to people and can have a big impact on peoples lives”
- “food is deep”

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One student, for instance, realized “the connection that food has to pretty much everything.” And even more acknowledged a more nuanced awareness of the impact food has on culture. For example, one student remarked on the “different cultures and ways food can be used to express oneself and your family.” Another student writes: “food is more then [sic] just eating, food can mean a lot to people and can have a big impact on peoples lives.” Perhaps most profound of all, one student said that “food is deep.”

Perhaps most importantly, since I want to place emphasis on the important model this course serves in approaching WAC, questions six and seven yielded the most fodder for thematic coding related to WAC and teaching for transfer. It’s important to note for question seven, I specifically did not mention the food theme, but left the question about “learning anything” vague enough for students to interpret for themselves. Because of this, only a few students mentioned food in particular, but most students wrote about generalizable writing skills. Some students made explicit distinctions between academic and non-academic transfer, as you saw earlier.



“the fact that looking closer at things not only improves
your writing, but everyday experiences”

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One said they learned “the fact that looking closer at things not only improves your writing, but everyday experiences.” Others mentioned skills that transferred specifically to either one or the other (academic or nonacademic). One example of a student who indicated academic-specific transferrable skills wrote about “how to structure paragraphs.”

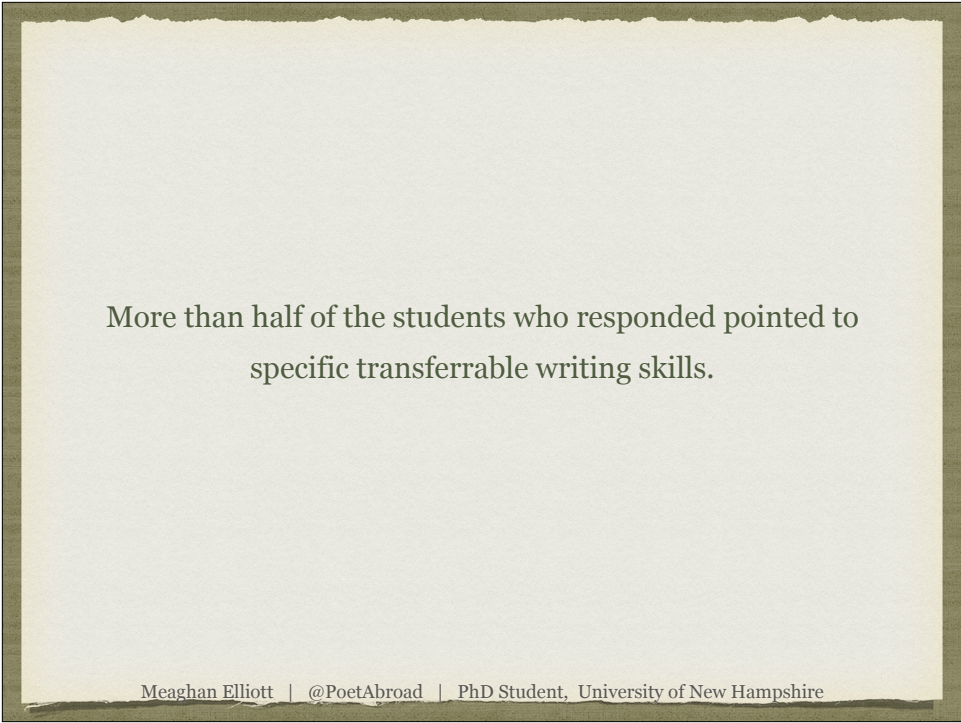
transfer for peer review skills

“all of the techniques which make for a quality peer review”

“I also learned to really take a good look at my own papers to edit them. I always hated people reading my papers but found it helpful in this class.”

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Four students mentioned their successful experiences with peer review: one learned about “all of the techniques which make for a quality peer review” and another said “I also learned to really take a good look at my own papers to edit them. I always hated people reading my papers but found it helpful in this class.” Another student remarked that the analysis essay “was a useful experience.”



More than half of the students who responded pointed to specific transferrable writing skills.

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Is the food theme meant to teach content-specific things from other courses? Not necessarily. But the essays they wrote in this food-themed first year writing course opened them up to accessing more of that information. More than half of the students who responded specifically pointed to transferrable writing skills.

IMPLICATIONS

- food writing opens opportunities for cultural awareness and conversation
- engage directly with material
- learn to see majors/ interests as cross-disciplinary
- food writing not necessarily limited to one field's set of conventions



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Implications

Finally, by seeing how their classmates engage in different ways of food writing, students can experience the ways food writing opens up the opportunities to talk about cultural differences, even going so far as to blur the boundaries between race, class, and gender. In this way, their experience with the first year writing course is what Susan McLeod makes reference to when she talks about the shift from learning through the “delivery method” to learning by engaging directly with the material. They learn to see their academic majors as flexible to cross-disciplinary study. Ultimately, food writing is an excellent way of proving to students how writing can cross borders and combine interests.

The issue that some people have with the FYW course is that, usually when a FWY course is themed, that theme is limited to one particular field and set of conventions. In the past, I have taught first year writing classes with other themes, such as popular culture, literary analysis, and political rhetoric. Through my experience, I’ve found that food doesn’t tie itself to those conventions in the ways other themes do. Literary analysis is great, for instance, but very specific to English literature conventions and not much help to those students outside of the humanities. My experience in teaching with the theme of pop culture yielded a little more flexibility and interest, but still didn’t prove as applicable to as many fields as food studies—popular culture is relative and particular to time and place. Everybody eats, but not everyone watches *Breaking Bad* (not even everyone watches television, for that matter).

This is, of course, not to say that food writing is the only universal topic. Obviously the data from twenty-one survey participants from one course at the University of New Hampshire is not enough to draw generalizable conclusions about all FYW students or all WAC programs. It does, however, demonstrate that there are topics out there that lend themselves to Writing Across the Curriculum and we ought to spend more time finding and employing these topics if we are to keep students engaged in the curriculum and invested in their writing abilities.

Thank you



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Works Cited

McLeod, Susan H., and Eric Miraglia. "Writing Across the Curriculum in a Time of Change." *WAC for the New Millenium: Strategies for Continuing Writing-across-the-curriculum Programs*. Ed. Susan H. McLeod, Eric Miraglia, Margot Soven, and Christopher Thaiss. N.p.: NCTE, 2001. 1-27.

McLeod, Susan H. "The Pedagogy of Writing Across the Curriculum." *Writing across the Curriculum: A Critical Sourcebook*. By Terry Myers. Zawacki and Paul M. Rogers. Boston: Bedford/St. Martins, 2012. 53-68.

Appendix A

Food Writing Questionnaire

There are 8 questions on this questionnaire (front and back of this page). Please feel free to answer any or all of them as you wish.

1. When you first found out the topic of this course, what was your reaction?

2. Did you ever feel negatively limited by the focus of the food theme in this course? If so, please explain.

3. Did you find that the focus of the course made it easier for you to come up with ideas to write about? Can you give an example?

4. Were there any readings you remember as being particularly helpful or interesting? Why?

5. Were there any readings you remember as being particularly unhelpful? Why?

6. What is one thing you learned about food in this course that stands out to you? (If you can think of more than one, please feel free to share)

7. Have you learned anything in this class that you feel will be applicable elsewhere (either in another class or in your everyday life)? Whatever your answer, please explain.

8. Is there anything else you would like to add or share about the theme of food in a first year writing course that you haven't mentioned here yet?

Appendix B
Coding for Survey:

Raw data examples	Preliminary codes	Code description/explanation	Final code	Total occurrence
"I thought it was very odd first" "I thought it was a little strange and I was nervous that there wouldn't be enough for me to write about. But, I was wrong and ended up loving it"	reaction shift	indicates or implies that the student changed their mind about how they felt about the theme over the course of the semester (these are mostly gathered from question number one, but some indicated this shift in question number two, as well)	RS	6
"[food] brings people together"	unity/ unifier	student acknowledges learning that food is a unifier	UN	4
"the different cultures and ways food can be used to express oneself and your family"	food as social/ cultural	student identifies food as being part of cultural/social identity or expression	CUL	8
"this class has made me a better writer and I will use that in all my other classes and in everyday life" "the fact that looking closer at things not only improves your writing but everyday experiences"	nonacademic transfer	student makes clear reference to non-academic skills transfer (or makes clear distinction between academic and non-academic transfer)	NAT	5
"I learned in this class to expand your writing and this can help in future writing courses"	academic transfer	student makes clear reference to academic skills transfer (academic only)	AT	12
"the first reading about the crabs because it gave me a sense of what food writing was all about" "the theme was good and gave chances to branch out in writing" "popular type of writing"	genre awareness	student indicates a learning experience about the genre of food writing (implies lack of awareness before the course)	GA	6
"that food is more than [sic] just eating, food can mean a lot to people and can have a big impact on peoples lives."	meaning/significance	shows that student becomes more aware of food's significance on a global, rather than local or personal, level	MS	7
"I did not feel limited since we still wrote various types of essays" "there were many ways I could write about food in different contexts" "Literally every essay made me think more creatively about food"	genre flexibility/ theme flexibility	student indicates why the theme is universal in some way by pointing to its flexibility with genre	FLX	11
"knowing [class] would be about something I love made me less worried" "food is something everyone can relate to and connect about" "everyone eats food, so everyone can relate"	approachability/ relatable	student either indicates personal investment in the topic or agrees with the relatable nature or approachability of the topic	AR	10

Notes for Appendix B:

A word on nuanced answers or outliers in the data (for organization's sake, I'll address these chronologically by question):

In question two, in answering whether students felt at all limited by the theme, one student remarked a shift in perspective over the course of the semester. This particular answer was included in the thematic coding, under the category "reaction shift" (RS).

Question four asks students to identify readings that were helpful to them. Four students mentioned a reading from Transitions, our UNH compilation of student-written papers and essay from the previous year's FYW classes. These readings did not relate to the food theme in the course and were therefore outliers in the responses to this question.

The following question—question five—asked about unhelpful readings. One student gave the response that "most were helpful, but there were a few that I couldn't really get excited about." Since this was a response worded in a slightly different manner, and didn't specifically mention "unhelpful" readings, I saw it as an outlier.

Appendix C
Quantifiable content analysis:

Question	positive or "yes"	negative or "no"	neutral/ unsure	outlier	no answer
1. When you first found out the topic of this course, what was your reaction?	10	3	3		1
2. Did you ever feel negatively limited by the focus of the food theme in this course? If so, please explain.	4	16			1
3. Did you find that the focus of the course made it easier for you to come up with ideas to write about? Can you give an example?	18	3			
4. Were there any readings you remember as being particularly helpful or interesting? Why?	12	3			4
5. Were there any readings you remember as being particularly unhelpful? Why?	4	13			1
7. Have you learned anything in this class that you feel will be applicable elsewhere (either in another class or in your everyday life)? Whatever your answer, please explain.	20				1

Notes for Appendix C:

You will notice I have omitted questions six and eight from this chart. Question six is not applicable here, since it was purely open-ended and did not yield these types of quantifiable results. I will also not treat question eight in this section, as it was also purely open-ended and the comments students made in response to this question were mostly general responses about it being a good class. For instance, I was amused to see a few comments such as “This class usually ends up in a trip to the dining hall” and “when I told my friends about it all of them would give me a weird look.”