Using Recipe Archives for Place-Based Research and Writing

Ashley M. Beardsley

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Overview

Cookbooks “allude to meals and events, people and places, success and failures, joys and sorrows, lives and deaths” representing “the life worlds—past and present—of their creators” (Theophano 83). Through archival research, students explore how cookbooks and recipes are more than instructions that teach people how to cook. Instead, such texts memorialize places and people by mentioning names, restaurants, and locations as they use food to cultivate “a sense of collective memory that in turn shapes communal identity” (Eves 281). This assignment demonstrates how instructors can use food in writing classrooms to engage students in place-based research and writing. The assignment prepares students to use food as a source to start triangulating evidence to “establish validity of findings by consulting multiple accounts of an event obtained from sources” (Gaillet and Rose 133). After creating a collaborative list of foods that students believe define their location based on their experience and brief, informal informational interviews with classmates, friends, and family, they will choose one of the foods to explore further, using digital archives to answer the question, how does this food memorialize our community? Finally, students will use their research to write a short (3-5 page) essay that answers this question.

Time Commitment

2 weeks (4 class meetings)

Materials

Materials needed include a shared document to collect the initial list
of foods (a cloud-based platform or LMS discussion board), a device to record conversations, and a device to access the digital archives (a computer or tablet works best).

Assignment Process

▪ First, instructors will determine a location for the class to research. Focusing on a shared location, such as the institution or the surrounding city or town, works best. This location will act as the topic for discussion and research.

▪ Then, students read Lynée Lewis Gaillet and Jessica Rose’s “At Work in the Archives: Place-Based Research and Writing.” Instructors lead a class discussion about archival research, explaining how it involves “consulting multiple accounts of an event obtained from sources” (Gaillet and Rose 133). At this stage in the assignment, encourage students to think about a food that interests them.

▪ Next, students will conduct informal informational interviews with classmates, friends, and family to collaboratively create a list of foods and primary materials (recordings and notes) that begin defining the chosen location. This list will act as an invention activity to provide students with specific foods to search for in the digital archive (described in this assignment’s next step). The interviews act as students’ first source. Though the interviews are informal, students should record their conversations and take notes to use as primary sources.

▪ Then, instructors introduce the class to the digital archive, the *Cookbooks and Home Economics Collection*, to demonstrate how to approach the shared research question, how does this food memorialize our community? For example, a class researching food in Buffalo, NY, could search for texts in this collection that mention the Western
New York sandwich, beef on weck. After exploring the search results, the instructor should model how to consult other sources related to their findings. For instance, what articles in the city’s local newspaper, The Buffalo News, mention beef on weck?

- Current digital recipe archives like the Cookbooks and Home Economics Collection and HEARTH – Home Economics Archive: Research, Tradition, History predominately feature texts curated and written by white authors focusing on American cookery. Instructors should discuss the lack of diversity represented in archival materials during class and might utilize the Mexican Cookbook Collection depending on the chosen location.

- Next, students will select a food from the collaborative list to research and use the digital archive and digitally available local publications (e.g., blogs, magazines, and newspapers). Depending on the number of foods students’ identified during informational interviews, instructors can limit food choice to one student, allow multiple students to write about the same food, or have students interested in the same food work as co-authors.

- Then, instructors will provide the following questions to guide students’ research: Where (country, state, city) did this food originate? Where or when is this food generally eaten? Is it connected to a celebration or social event(s), or is it an everyday meal? Consider the publication date of your sources. What was happening politically at that time, and how might this impact the food? If a student can’t find a specific food, encourage them to modify their search term. For example, if beef on weck had zero search results, searching for sandwich might be a good starting point.
Finally, students will synthesize their research to write a 3-5 page essay that references the interviews and notes curated by the class, at least one source from the *Cookbooks and Home Economics Collection* or another digital recipe archive, and 2-3 outside sources. The sources should be used to reveal the food’s role in memorializing community members, places, and events. Ultimately, students’ essays should use the above questions to guide their research and answer the question, how does this food memorialize our community?

Learning Outcomes

Students engaging in this assignment will:

- Explore how ordinary artifacts (e.g., recipes and cookbooks) function rhetorically
- Connect primary and secondary research to understand the rhetorical situation
- Use research to support an argument

Learning Accommodations

- The *Cookbooks and Home Economics Collection* materials are available with a free account. Students can digitally borrow texts, which allows them to zoom in to make the pagers larger and use the archive’s built-in screen reader.

Works Cited

*Cookbooks and Home Economics Collection*, archive.org/details/cbk.

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doi.org/10.1207/s15327981rr2403_3.


*Mexican Cookbook Collection*,
digital.utsa.edu/digital/custom/mexicancookbooks.


Further Reading


doi:10.25148/clj.10.1.009276.