LESSON 1

The Story of Food

The story of food traces a path from farm to fork.

GRADE	TIME	FINAL PRODUCT
Grades 6–8	Two class periods, 50–60 min each	Food Story artifact, shared in a class gallery

BIG IDEA

Every food has a story: when, where, why, and how it traveled from its source to our plates, and who was involved along the way. Reading those stories helps us understand food systems and make conscious choices.

ESSENTIAL QUESTION

How does food move from farm to table and back to the soil, and why does it matter?

ACTIVITY OVERVIEW

Read the label, tell the story.

Across two class periods, students learn that every food has a story, and that they can read parts of that story from labels and packaging.

Day 1 opens with the Nourish short film *Whole and Healthy*, which introduces the whole-vs-processed distinction, builds shared vocabulary through the industrial and local food system diagrams, and lets pairs investigate real food labels using the Food Story Clues page. Day 2 challenges pairs to build a Food Story creative artifact (a poster, slide deck, short video, or infographic) tracing one food from farm to table and back to the soil, then share it in a class gallery.

By the end, students see food systems as interconnected webs of people, places, and choices, and recognize themselves as participants who can ask better questions about what's on their plate.

STANDARDS ALIGNMENT

Four subjects, one lesson.

SCIENCE (NGSS)

What students do

Develop and use a model to explain how food moves through systems of production, processing, distribution, consumption, and waste. Apply scientific principles to evaluate how food systems impact the environment and human well-being.

Three-dimensional emphasis. SEPs: Developing and Using Models; Obtaining, Evaluating, and Communicating Information. CCCs: Systems and System Models; Cause and Effect.

MS-LS2-3 MS-ESS3-3

ELA (CCSS)

What students do

Integrate information from labels, diagrams, texts, and media to explain the story of a food. Write or produce an informative Food Story artifact using evidence. Engage in collaborative discussions about food systems.

RST.6-8.7 WHST.6-8.2 SL.6.1/7.1/8.1

SOCIAL STUDIES (C3)

What students do

Explain how economic decisions in food production and consumption affect the well-being of individuals, businesses, and communities. Explain how environmental and cultural factors influence food systems. Evaluate how individual and community choices can shape sustainable food systems.

D2.Eco.1.6-8 D2.Geo.4.6-8 D2.Civ.12.6-8

HEALTH (NHES)

What students do

Explain how levels of food processing connect to personal and community health. Analyze how food system practices influence health outcomes. Advocate for food choices that support human and environmental health.

NHES 1 NHES 2 NHES 8

BACKGROUND FOR TEACHERS

What to know before you teach.

All of our food has a story. Each story includes when, where, why, and how a food travels from its original source to our plates, and who is involved along the way.

For example, a box of corn chips might begin on a thousand-acre conventional corn farm in Iowa, travel by truck to a processing plant in Illinois, then to packaging, then by truck again to a grocery store. An heirloom tomato at a farmers market might come from a small farm twenty miles away, picked the day before. Both stories are part of a food system: all the people, places, and steps that bring food to a community. By becoming more aware of food systems, students can begin to make conscious choices about what they eat and who they support.

Labels are a good place to begin investigating a food's story, but they tell only part of it. Full stories require research, inference, and sometimes creative sleuthing: the kind of critical reading students will practice as they examine real packages on Day 1.

VOCABULARY

Two sets, one timing rule.

Introduce Set A on Day 1; let Set B emerge as students read labels.

SET A, NEED TO KNOW FIRST



food system

All the people, places, and steps involved in bringing food to our community.



industrial food system

A system that produces large amounts of food using machines, chemicals, and long-distance transportation.



local food system

A system that produces and sells food close to where people live.



whole food

Food that is close to how it comes from nature, with few or no added ingredients (an apple, an egg, brown rice).



processed food
Food that has been changed from its natural form, often with added sugar, salt, or preservatives.

SET B, ENCOUNTER AS YOU READ



monocrop
A field planted with only one type of crop.



commodity
A basic farm product, like corn, wheat, or soybeans, grown in huge amounts and bought and sold around the world.



compost
Food scraps and yard waste broken down into nutrient-rich soil.

MATERIALS & PREPARATION

What you'll print and cue up.

MATERIALS

- ☐ **Nourish short film**: *Whole and Healthy* (Dr. Nadine Burke, ~2 min): Dr. Burke explains the difference between whole and processed foods.
- ☐ **Visual glossary slides**: one per term.
- ☐ **Food labels and packaging a wide range, both unprocessed and processed**: produce stickers, dried beans, canned goods, dairy cartons, cereal boxes, snack bags. Plan for 1 item per pair.
- ☐ **Industrial Food System and Local Food System diagrams**: printable PDF or projected.
- ☐ **Food Story Clues student page**: printable PDF, 1 per pair; guided questions for examining a food label.
- ☐ **Creative artifact materials**: for Day 2: pairs choose one format: poster (chart paper + colored markers), slide deck (Google Slides / PowerPoint), short video (60–90 sec, phone-recorded), or infographic (drawing with labels + data points). Provide access to the tools each pair needs.
- ☐ Atlas or Google Maps for tracing where foods come from.
- ☐ **Sticky notes**: small pad per student for gallery walk feedback on Day 2.

PREPARATION

- ☐ Cue up the Nourish short film *Whole and Healthy* for Day 1, Step 1. Confirm video and audio play; turn on captions.
- ☐ Cue up vocabulary slides and the two Food System diagrams.
- ☐ Collect food labels and packaging from a wide range of foods; include both unprocessed and heavily processed items. Bring real packages, not just photos, when possible.
- ☐ Print the Food Story Clues student page (1 per pair). Prepare Day 2 creative artifact tools: chart paper + markers for poster pairs, shared slide template for slide-deck pairs, phone/laptop access for video pairs.
- ☐ Decide pair groupings in advance; Day 2 work goes faster when pairs are pre-set.

DAY 1

Reading the story of food.

50 minutes

1 Watch: *Whole and Healthy*

7 MIN

TEACHER

- Pre-frame: introduce the film. Ask students to listen for what makes a food **“whole”** vs **“processed.”**
- Play *Whole and Healthy* (~2 min). Captions on.
- Pair share: one surprise from the film, plus one food they ate recently, and whether it was more whole or processed.
- Whole-class capture: invite 2–3 students to share. On the board, write **“WHOLE”** and **“PROCESSED”** as two columns and capture their examples.
- Bridge: today we’ll investigate the story of real foods (from labels and packaging) and see whether they’re more whole or more processed.

STUDENTS

Share with a partner: one surprise from the film, plus one food you ate recently, and whether it was whole or processed.

Add examples to the whole/processed lists on the board.

2 Two food systems compared

10 MIN

TEACHER

- Project the Industrial Food System diagram and the Local Food System diagram side by side.
- Project the Set A vocabulary slides. Walk through the five core terms.
- Ask: **“Which steps does every food go through? What’s the same between these two systems? What’s different?”**
- Highlight that the SAME steps (growing, processing, transporting, eating, waste) happen in both, but very differently.
- Bridge: today’s Food Story Clues investigation will help pairs figure out where their food’s story fits along this continuum.

STUDENTS

Share one similarity and one difference between the two systems.

Consider: is your family’s food more industrial or local? What clues would tell you?

3 Food Story Clues: pair investigation

25 MIN

TEACHER

- Pair students up and give each pair one food label or package plus a Food Story Clues page.
- Model the first question with the whole class using a sample label.
- Set a visible timer at 22 min. Circulate. Ask: **“What ingredient surprised you? Where do you think this came from? Who do you imagine was involved?”**
- Encourage pairs to mark reasonable guesses with a question mark.
- 3 min before time: ask each pair to circle the ONE most surprising clue they found.

STUDENTS

Answer each question on the Food Story Clues page. Mark guesses with a question mark.

Discuss ingredients, likely origins, and the people involved in your food’s story.

Circle the one most surprising clue you found.

4 Quick share + preview Day 2

5 MIN

TEACHER

- Invite 3–4 pairs to share their most surprising clue.
- Ask quickly: **“Was your food more industrial or more local? Why?”**
- Preview Day 2: pairs will turn their findings into a Food Story creative artifact (poster, slide deck, video, or infographic) tracing their food from farm to table and back to the soil.
- Collect Food Story Clues pages for tomorrow.

STUDENTS

Share the most surprising clue your pair found.

Reflect: Is your food more industrial or local? Why do you think so?

Pass in your Food Story Clues page.

DAY 2

Food Story artifacts + gallery walk.

55–60 minutes

1 Re-orient + introduce the creative artifact

5 MIN

TEACHER

- Return Food Story Clues pages to each pair.
- Frame Day 2: **"Today you'll create a Food Story artifact (your choice of format) that tells the story of your food from farm to table."**
- Display the requirements (same regardless of format): name and image of the food; four story stops (where it grew, who handled it, how it traveled, and what happens to waste); at least 3 vocab words; and a one-sentence **"Big surprise"** line.
- Present the 4 format options:
  - Poster: chart paper + colored markers
  - Slide deck: 2–3 slides in Google Slides / PowerPoint
  - Short video: 60–90 sec, phone-recorded
  - Infographic: drawing with labels + data points
- Pairs decide on a format and confirm they have the tools they need.

STUDENTS

Review your Food Story Clues page with your Day 1 partner.

Choose your format: poster, slide deck, short video, or infographic.

2 Build the Food Story creative artifact

30 MIN

TEACHER

- Distribute paper and markers, share the slide template link, or arrange phone/laptop stations depending on the formats pairs chose. Set a visible 28-min timer.
- Circulate with prompts: **"What's the strongest evidence for that part of the story? What's a reasonable guess where the label doesn't tell you? How will someone at a glance understand your food's story?"**
- *Optional:* project Google Maps to help pairs locate where their food might have come from.
- Video pairs: coach a short script (farm → factory → store → home → waste), then the big surprise. Keep it to 60–90 sec.
- 5 min before time: ask each pair to write or record their one-sentence **"Big surprise"** line.

STUDENTS

Create your Food Story artifact together: use color, images, short labels, and at least 3 unit vocab words.

Show four story stops: where it grew, who handled it, how it traveled, what happens to waste.

End with a "Big surprise" line: one thing you want classmates to remember.

3 Gallery walk + sticky-note feedback

15 MIN

TEACHER

- Set up the gallery: posters and infographics on walls; slide decks displayed on laptops or projected at station tables; videos playing on a phone or laptop.
- Give each student 3 sticky notes. Direct them to leave one of three kinds of feedback at each station: **"I notice…"** (something specific), **"I wonder…"** (a question), or **"I'd ask the farmer…"** (a question for the producer).
- One partner stays at the station to answer questions when visited, or press play on the video.
- Time it: 12 min circulating + 3 min back at own station to read feedback.

STUDENTS

Visit at least 3 other pairs' artifacts.

Leave one specific sticky note at each station you visit.

Return to your station and read what others wrote about your food.

4 Closing reflection

5 MIN

TEACHER

- Lead a brief whole-class reflection. Ask one of: What surprised you most across all the food stories? Which foods had the longest stories? Which had the shortest? What's one question you have now that you didn't have before?
- Close by naming the takeaway: every food has a story, and now they know how to read it and ask better questions.

STUDENTS

Share one observation from the gallery walk.

Notice patterns across your classmates' food stories.

ASSESSMENT

What understanding looks like.

Students demonstrate understanding by:

- Using Set A vocabulary accurately in discussion and writing.
- Completing the Food Story Clues page with reasonable answers and labeled guesses.
- Producing a Food Story creative artifact (poster, slide deck, video, or infographic) that shows the four story stops clearly.
- Identifying at least one surprising fact about their food's journey.
- Comparing industrial and local food systems with evidence from their food.

Look-fors: pairs that mark inferences with a question mark, rather than guessing confidently, demonstrate stronger informational reading.

DIFFERENTIATION & SCAFFOLDING

Build access in.

FOR MULTILINGUAL LEARNERS

- Use the projected vocabulary slides during the label investigation; pair English with home-language equivalents when possible.
- Allow Food Story artifact captions or narration in a student's home language alongside English.
- Pair multilingual learners with classmates who share their home language whenever possible.

FOR STUDENTS WITH READING IEPS

- Provide pre-marked labels (highlight **"ingredients," "product of," "distributed by"**).
- Use real foods alongside labels so the food is visible while the label is read.
- Allow students to record audio responses to the Food Story Clues page.

FOR STUDENTS WHO FINISH EARLY

- Add a fifth story stop: **"What happens to me after I eat this food?"** (digestion → energy → waste).
- Investigate a second food and compare its story to the first.

CONTEXT NOTES

Family food choices are personal. Some students may feel called out if their family relies heavily on processed foods (often because of time, cost, or access). Treat all food choices respectfully: the lesson is about learning to ask questions, not judging plates.

Ingredient origins are often guesses. Many labels don't show country of origin. Reasonable inference, clearly marked, is part of strong informational reading.

EXTENSIONS

Five ways to go further.

EXTENSION 01

The Story of My Favorite Food

Students choose a favorite food they eat regularly and tell its full story: people, places, and steps required to get the food from its source to their plate. They write a half-page “Food Story” and share it with the class.

EXTENSION 02

Market Visit and Analysis

Arrange a class visit to a farmers market and/or supermarket. Compare and contrast the foods for sale and how they’re presented. How many foods are marketed as local? Students compare cost, packaging, origin, and visual appeal across the two settings, then build a short comparison report.

EXTENSION 03

Learning from Food Workers

Students prepare 3-question interviews with a farmer, grocer, cafeteria manager, or food-truck owner to learn how food moves through the local food system and compare it to industrial pathways. They synthesize what they hear into a one-page profile.

EXTENSION 04

Food Dollars and Farmers

Students research how much of a food dollar goes to farmers and discuss how different food systems affect farmer livelihoods. Builds quantitative literacy. Pair with a class chart showing the breakdown.

EXTENSION 05

Design a Better Food System

Students choose one stage of the food system (farming, processing, transportation, retail, or waste) and design a way to make that stage better for people, animals, or the planet. They present their idea as a 2-minute pitch with a poster or slide.