

1. Mead argues that the fundamental question at hand is: Why do we have this constant struggle with food? Draft your own response to this question, identifying at least three potential reasons for why Americans struggle with food.

2. Mead discusses American intolerance of obesity. Discuss the American moralization of body size. Why do Americans have “peculiar attitudes” (p. 21) about how citizens should eat and exercise?

Research/Synthesize

1. First published in 1971, Mead’s article discusses the Weight Watchers movement, a weight loss program that is still popular today. What characteristics of Weight Watchers have contributed to its decades of popularity? How has Weight Watchers changed over time and how do these modifications reflect changes in American approaches to eating, weight, and lifestyle?

2. Mead discusses the National Association to Aid Fat Americans (NAAFA), an organization that protects the interests of persecuted obese citizens. In the style of a debate, draft three arguments in favor of size acceptance and three arguments against it.

2. Barthes

Test Your Reading

1. Why does Barthes suggest that (at the time he was writing) French scholars do not give food sufficient attention?

“For we do not see our own food or, worse, we assume that it is insignificant. Even—or perhaps especially—to the scholar, the subject of food connotes triviality or guilt” (pp. 23–24).

2. Explain what Barthes means when he writes that food signifies (p. 24) and give an example from the text and one of your own.

Food acts as a system of communication. Examples will vary from the text and student-created examples (p. 24).

Apply Your Reading

1. Barthes suggests that for Americans, the opposite of food that is sweet is food that is crisp. What does this mean? Do you agree with this characterization? Provide an example supporting or critiquing this observation.

2. Barthes is famous for taking a simple everyday object and analyzing its symbolic meanings. Now that you’ve read Barthes, choose a food or aspect of eating *not* mentioned

in the reading and give it the Barthes treatment by writing a paragraph on what the item signifies.

Research/Synthesize

1. While Barthes writes about many everyday items in his work, food is especially prominent. Research some other semioticians and their work. Do any others rely on food as Barthes does? Why do you think food is such a powerful vehicle for exploring signs and symbols?
2. Compare and contrast the ways Barthes writes about sugar to the way Mintz writes about the same topic, highlighting one point of similarity and at least two points of difference.

3. Bourdieu

Test Your Reading

1. According to Bourdieu, how does a professional, such as a teacher who has high cultural capital and low economic capital, make food choices?

Teachers “pursue originality at the lowest economic cost and go in for exoticism (Italian, Chinese cooking etc.) and culinary populism (peasant dishes)” (p. 32).

2. What specific manners do the bourgeoisie observe as part of a meal?

“The manner of presenting and consuming the food, the organization of the meal and setting of the places, strictly differentiated according to the sequence of dishes and arranged to please the eye, the presentation of the dishes, considered as much in terms of shape and colour (like works of art) as of their consumable substance, the etiquette governing posture and gesture, ways of serving oneself and others, of using the different utensils, the seating plan, strictly but discreetly hierarchical, the censorship of all bodily manifestations of the act or pleasure of eating (such as noise or haste), the very refinement of the things consumed, with quality more important than quantity” (p. 38).

Apply Your Reading

1. Bourdieu discusses the gendered nature of food preparation and consumption. Do men and women eat differently? How so? How much of this difference is biological and how much is socially constructed?
2. Bourdieu argues that the professional class prefers light foods that result in a light and slim body, while the working class prefers heavy foods that result in a strong body. Do you agree with this observation? What role does class play in determining the foods that one eats and one’s resulting physical body?