



Lesson Plan: Evaluating Information on Food Labels

THE FILM

This lesson plan utilizes the film and POV's website resources for **Food, Inc.**, a documentary that examines food in the United States and the industry that produces it. Students can use these materials to explore what consumers should be able to learn about food from Nutrition Facts panels.

POV documentaries can be recorded off-the-air and used for educational purposes for up to one year from their initial broadcast. In addition, POV offers a lending library of DVDs and VHS tapes that you can borrow any time during the school year — FOR FREE! Get started by joining our Community Network:

www.amdoc.org/outreach/events/

Please visit our Film Library at http://www.amdoc.org/outreach_filmlibrary.php to find other films suitable for classroom use.

OBJECTIVES

By the end of this lesson, students will:

- Use viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret a film clip.
- Identify corn-derived ingredients listed on Nutrition Facts panels of food packaging.
- Analyze and discuss what details should be provided on Nutrition Facts panels.
- Develop personal philosophy statements about what consumers should be able to learn about their food from Nutrition Facts panels.

GRADE LEVELS

6-12

SUBJECT AREAS

Economics, Civics, U.S. History, Health, Current Events, Language Arts

MATERIALS

- Method of showing the entire class online video clips and allowing student groups to conduct research on the Web.
- Handout: [Corn-derived Ingredients](#) (PDF file)

ESTIMATED TIME NEEDED

One 50-minute class period

FILM CLIP

Clip from **Food, Inc.**: "A Cornucopia of Choices" (length 4:55)

The clip begins at 17:06 with author Michael Pollan sitting at his computer and ends at 22:01 with a shot of packaged meat at a supermarket and the voice-over saying, "...had we not fed them this diet of cheap grain."

ACTIVITY

1. For this activity, ask each student in advance to bring in a food container or a food label that has a Nutrition Facts panel on it.
2. Begin the activity either by showing the class an image of a cheeseburger, French fries and a milkshake (search on [Flickr](#)) or by placing the real thing on a table at the front of the classroom. Ask students what these three foods have in common. Let students share their ideas, and then explain that they are all made *with* or *from* corn. The meat comes from corn-fed cattle, the bun and condiments contain high fructose corn syrup and the fries are cooked in corn oil. Even the shake contains corn syrup solids and cellulose gum derived from corn. Often, people will order a soft drink with a burger instead of a milkshake, and soft drinks, too, contain high fructose corn syrup. In fact, a [study](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2582047/) (http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2582047/) of fast food published by the National Academy of Sciences found that 160 food products purchased at Wendy's restaurants across the United States all contained some form of corn.
3. Explain that many of the foods available at the grocery store also contain corn. Then, show the film clip. Set up the clip by telling students that Michael Pollan is an author who has written books about the U.S. food industry.
4. Display or distribute the list of corn-derived ingredients provided in the Materials section of this lesson plan. Have groups of three or four students examine the ingredients listed on their food packaging and make a list of any corn-based ingredients they find. If an ingredient is found on more than one package, students can add tally marks next to that ingredient on the list. Ask a member of each group to report that group's findings to the class.
5. Discuss:
 - Which corn-derived ingredients are most commonly found in the sample of foods examined in class?
 - What kinds of food typically contain ingredients derived from corn? Do students consider these foods "healthy"? Why or why not?
 - How frequently do students eat these foods?
 - How do students feel about the idea that corn has been "hiding" in these foods, often behind different names?
 - How frequently do students read the Nutrition Facts panels on the foods they eat?
 - How much do students want to know about the ingredients in their food?
 - Who should decide what information is provided on food labels? Consumers? The government? The food industry?
6. Conclude the activity by challenging students to write individual personal philosophy statements about what consumers should be able to learn about their food from Nutrition Facts panels.

ASSESSMENT SUGGESTIONS

Students can be assessed on:

- Participation in the group work.
- Contributions to class discussions.
- The organization and content of their personal philosophy statements.

EXTENSIONS AND ADAPTATIONS

Practice eating more healthful food. Challenge students to develop menus for one full day of eating that only include foods that haven't been processed. To get them started, read and discuss the excerpt from Michael Pollan's *Food Rules* (http://www.pbs.org/pov/foodinc/pollan_foodrules.php) and our [favorite food lists](http://www.pbs.org/pov/foodinc/eating_guide.php) (http://www.pbs.org/pov/foodinc/eating_guide.php) at the POV website. Have students develop and carry out their meal plans and then report back on their experiences in journal entries or oral reports.

- **Learn more about your school's cafeteria food.** Develop a class set of standards to measure the quality of school lunch. Then analyze a week's worth of school lunches based on this criteria. Is nutritional information available for your school's cafeteria food? If not, why not? Review the [school lunch photo gallery](http://americanlunchroom.com/) (<http://americanlunchroom.com/>) to see how your school compares, and add a photo of the food from your lunchroom.
- **Tour a food label.** Have students take the food packaging they brought in for the main activity and write up tours of their food labels using [Food Smarts: Understanding Food Labels](http://pbskids.org/itsmylife/body/foodsmarts/article4.html) (<http://pbskids.org/itsmylife/body/foodsmarts/article4.html>) as a model. Afterwards, ask students if they think food labels provide enough information to consumers. If not, what additional information would students like to see?
- **Conduct an informal study** that examines how menu labeling affects our eating choices. Using a [study](http://nwitimes.com/app/parent/?p=5367) (<http://nwitimes.com/app/parent/?p=5367>) by the Seattle Children's Research Institute as a model, find out whether providing calorie counts on menus influences what foods we choose to eat. Prepare two sets of fast-food menus with a variety of typical fast-food items plus pictures, prices and names for each. On one set of menus, also show the related calories for each item. Invite some other classes or a group of students in the cafeteria to look at a menu and circle the foods they would choose for themselves. Then, analyze the resulting data and form conclusions.
- **Explore misleading claims on food packaging.** Review [A Brief History of Food and Nutrition Labeling](http://www.fooducate.com/blog/2008/10/25/1862-2008-a-brief-history-of-food-and-nutrition-labeling/) (<http://www.fooducate.com/blog/2008/10/25/1862-2008-a-brief-history-of-food-and-nutrition-labeling/>) and note the various food industry labeling programs that have been developed since 1990. Can students find any of these messages on the containers they brought in for the main activity? Discuss whether or not such labeling benefits consumers. Then have groups of two or three students write news stories and create visuals that draw from key sections of the report [Food Labeling Chaos](http://www.cspinet.org/new/200912291.html) (<http://www.cspinet.org/new/200912291.html>) from the Center for Science in the Public Interest. A helpful and succinct article based on this report outlines [Six Meaningless Claims on Food Labels](http://www.cspinet.org/new/200912291.html)

(<http://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/01/28/six-meaningless-claims-on-food-labels/>). Ask students to organize their materials into a class newscast.

RESOURCES

Food Labeling

http://www.access.gpo.gov/nara/cfr/waisidx_09/21cfr101_09.html

This excerpt from the Code of Federal Regulations outlines the requirements for food labeling.

Why the Fries Taste Good

http://www.pbs.org/pov/foodinc/fastfoodnation_01.php

This chapter from Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation* looks at the history, science and business of this fast food staple.

STANDARDS

These standards are drawn from "Content Knowledge," a compilation of content standards and benchmarks for K-12 curriculum by McRel (Mid-continent Research for Education and Learning) at <http://www.mcrel.org/standards-benchmarks/>.

Agricultural Education

Standard 1: Understands the connections between agriculture and society.

Family/Consumer Sciences

Standard 12: Understands how knowledge and skills related to nutrition and food affect the well-being of individuals, families and society.

Health

Standard 6: Understands essential concepts about nutrition and diet.

Standard 7: Knows how to maintain and promote personal health.

Language Arts

Standard 1: Uses the general skills and strategies of the writing process.

Standard 7: Uses reading skills and strategies to understand and interpret a variety of informational texts.

Standard 9: Uses viewing skills and strategies to understand and interpret visual media.

United States History

Standard 31: Understands economic, social and cultural developments in the contemporary United States.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Cari Ladd, M.Ed., is an educational writer with a background in secondary education and media development. Previously, she served as PBS Interactive's director of education, overseeing the development of curricular resources tied to PBS programs, the PBS TeacherSource website (now PBS Teachers) and online teacher professional development services. She has also taught in Maryland and Northern Virginia.