

WRITING LESSON

EATING TOGETHER



The YES! Magazine article, **You Are Who You Eat With** by **Katherine Gustafson**, is a story about why the people you choose to eat with, and how often you eat together, is important in these hectic times.

Students will use Katherine' Gustafson's story to write about their family's daily eating rituals and how these foster a sense of togetherness.

Part 1: The Article “You Are Who You Eat With”

Part 2: The Writing Prompt

Part 3: Writing Guidelines

Part 4: Evaluation Rubric

Part 5: Sample Essays

“Dinner Table Matters” by Kate LeBlanc, Grade 7

“Dinner at My House” by Hanna Walker, Grade 8

“Family Bonding: From Tabletops to Laptops” by Clara Lincoln, Grade 11

“Brothers Around the Table” by Willis Reed, Edmonds Community College

You Are Who You Eat With

Why hectic times call for a return to the family meal.



Photo by Patrick Barber.

By Katherine Gustafson

Reprinted from YES! Magazine, Winter 2011 issue

WHEN THE 10 GARCIA-PRATS BOYS GOT TOGETHER EVERY NIGHT FOR DINNER, THEY SHARED MORE THAN FOOD AROUND THE TABLE. They talked about the successes and frustrations of their days. The older boys helped the younger ones cut their meat. They compared their picks for the World Cup, a conversation that turned into an impromptu geography lesson.

Their mother, Cathy, author of *Good Families Don't Just Happen: What We Learned from Raising Our Ten Sons and How It Can Work for You*, strove to make the dinner table warm and welcoming, a place where her boys would want to linger. "Our philosophy is that dinnertime is not

just a time to feed your body; it's a time to feed your mind and your soul," she told me over the phone from her Houston, Texas, home. "It lets us have an opportunity to share our day, be part of each others' lives."

Today, families like the Garcia-Prats are the exception. According to the 2007 National Survey of Children's Health, fewer than half of Americans eat meals daily with their families, a statistic that highlights the breakneck pace at which we live and our grab-and-go food culture.

Increasing economic pressures only exacerbate these cultural trends, as many families are forced to work two jobs to afford the basics and have little time to slow down

and have dinner.

But the deterioration of the family meal may be more damaging than we realize. “Our lives have gotten so hectic and so busy that if you don’t set aside time as a family, I think you just get lost,” said Garcia-Prats. “Then you’re just individuals living in a building, instead of a family living in a home, supporting each other and being there for each other.”

Adults who prepare quality meals for children are offering something more important than a nutrition lesson: They are communicating that they care.

Dinner and Happiness

When food advocate and chef Tom French asked a student how she felt after his organization, the Experience Food Project, began replacing the bland, processed food in her school cafeteria with fresh, healthy school lunches, he received an unexpected answer.

“She gave it some serious thought,” he told me over the phone. “Then she said, ‘you know, I feel respected.’”

Moments like this make French believe that adults who prepare quality meals for children are offering something more important than a nutrition lesson: They are communicating that they care. This is why the Experience Food Project teaches PTA parents about the importance of prioritizing family meals and helps them schedule the logistics of dinnertime.

French says there are “mountains of statistical data” correlating family dinner with benefits such as better communication, higher academic performance, and improved eating habits. Having dinner together boosts family cohesiveness and is associated with children’s motivation in school, positive outlook, and avoidance of high-risk behaviors. Teens who frequently eat with their families are half as

likely to smoke or use pot than those who rarely have family dinners, according to researchers at The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University (CASA).

The correlation between family dinner and well-adjusted teens is so strong that CASA launched the first Family Day on September 27, an annual event honoring the family meal. The day recognizes that “parental engagement fostered during frequent family dinners is an effective tool to help keep America’s kids substance free.”

President Obama officially proclaimed Family Day 2010, noting that it served as an opportunity to “recommit to creating a solid foundation for the future health and happiness of all our nation’s children.”

Communities from all over the country held Family Day celebrations, and some made the event into a week-long affair. Families found creative ways to celebrate each others’ company over food—putting together homemade pizzas, picnicking, doing activities from CASA’s Family Dinner Kit, and eating at restaurants offering discounts for the occasion.

Such events draw attention to the ways in which meals together help families strengthen their relationships, according to Joseph A. Califano Jr., CASA Founder and Chairman and former U.S. Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare. “The more often teens have dinner with their parents, the more likely they are to report talking to their parents about what’s going on in their lives,” said Califano in a statement to press. “In today’s busy and overscheduled world, taking the time to come together for dinner really makes a difference in a child’s life.”

Family dinner also encourages the development of language skills and emotional intelligence in children. During dinner conversations, children learn how to articulate their feelings and experiences and to communicate respect—whether that means asking politely for a dish or talking about their day at school. Research shows that children who have acquired skills in identifying and expressing emotion and negotiating conflict

often experience less distress, have fewer behavior problems, hold more positive attitudes about school, and exhibit better academic performance.

Fusion Cuisine

Finding ways to connect is increasingly important as families become more diverse and must negotiate cultural and generational difference. “People are tired and they are working and they are blending cultures and blending generations,” said French, who grew up in a household with his great-grandmother.

Extended and blended families may find that dinner solidifies fledgling or fragile bonds.

Families of all types benefit from sharing life’s daily ups and downs around the table. In a 2010 study of a group of racially diverse, low-income, urban youth, kids who ate family dinner more frequently had more positive perceptions of their communication with their parents. Extended and blended families may find that dinner solidifies fledgling or fragile bonds. And families that unite multiple cultures can make the sharing of specific traditions and dishes—which, as French puts it, “carry generations of cultural DNA”—into a centerpiece of family bonding.

As Garcia-Prats sees it, dinner is a time when families can celebrate their differences. “We learn diversity appreciation in our homes,” she said. “It’s going to be hard to appreciate someone else’s religion or ethnicity or culture if we haven’t even learned to appreciate the uniqueness of each person in our own family. It’s one of our philosophies: We are 12 unique individuals in this home.”

At dinner, we bridge the gaps between us by sharing our food and the stories of our lives. And the moments we spend together at the table form the basis of something remarkably profound. Call it what you will—sibling bonding, communicating respect, bridging

cultures—but at the very least it is, as Garcia-Prats told me, “not just about food.” It is about the way food can connect us.

Katherine Gustafson wrote this article for What Happy Families Know, the Winter 2011 issue of YES! Magazine. Katherine is a freelance writer and editor with a background in international nonprofit organizations. She is currently writing a book about sustainable food.

Part 2: The Writing Prompt

Does it matter who you eat with and how often you eat together?

Part 3: Writing Guidelines

The writing guidelines below are intended to be just that: a guide. Please adapt to fit your curriculum.

- Provide an original essay title.
- Reference the article.
- Limit the essay to no more than 700 words.
- Pay attention to grammar and organization.
- Be original. Provide personal examples and insights.
- Demonstrate clarity of content and ideas.

Common Core State Standards:

This writing exercise meets several Common Core State Standards for grades 6-12, including W. 9-10.3 and W. 9-10.14 for Writing, and RI. 9-10 and RI. 9-10.2 for Reading: Informational Text. This standard applies to other grade levels. “9-10” is used as an example.

How did this lesson work for you and your students?

Share your feedback with us and other teachers
by leaving a comment on our website:

www.yesmagazine.org/for-teachers/writing-competition-essays/writing-lessons/eating-together

Part 4: Evaluation Rubric

Our rubric should serve as a guide, not an unreasonable or rigid standard. You've probably encountered similar rubrics before, but here are two quick pointers for using ours:

1. In the left column, find the criteria for evaluating essays.
2. In the top row, find scores from 4 (outstanding) to 1 (poor).

	4	3	2	1
Focus on topic	There is one clear, well-focused topic. Main idea is supported by detailed information.	Main idea is clear, but general.	Main idea is somewhat clear, but there is need for more supporting evidence.	Main idea is not clear. There is a seemingly random collection of information.
Organization	Details are placed in a logical order and the way they are presented effectively keeps the reader's interest.	Details are placed in a logical order, but the way they are presented sometimes make the writing less interesting.	Some details are not in a logical or expected order, and this distracts the reader.	There is no clear introduction of the main topic or structure of the paper.
Originality and strength of ideas	Formulates a thought-provoking, well-developed, and fairly original position on an issue.	Writer takes a clear position on an issue, though it is not developed fully.	Writer's position is evident, though it is vague.	Fails to take a clear position, or writer contradicts herself.
Evidence and/or reasoning	Provides specific reasons and/or evidence that demonstrate understanding and insight.	Offers adequate – though perhaps vague or incomplete – supporting reasons and/or evidence	Provides less than adequate or contradictory reasons or evidence to support position.	Offers only general reasons or evidence or none, or offers evidence contradictory to the writer's thesis or main idea.
Command of grammar and conventions	Command of conventions exhibited. Creative word choice and varied sentence structure.	Correct use of grammar and conventions (for the most part).	Weak control of grammar and conventions. Errors are distracting.	Use of grammar and conventions interferes with understanding.
Voice	Author's voice is strong and engaging. Draws reader in.	Writing attracts reader's interest. Author's voice shows engagement with the topic.	Technically well written; however, author's voice is weak.	Writing fails to engage the reader. Does not demonstrate writer's interest in topic.

* Adapted from "Rubric for Editorial – Commentary Essay" from LAEP.org and "6+1 Traits of Writing Rubric" from ReadWriteThink.org.

Dinner Table Matters

By Kate LeBlanc, Grade 7

How many times a week do you eat with your family? One, two, maybe three? Why is this? In the “olden” days everyone ate together. Though our hectic culture allows little time with our families, who you eat with and how often you eat together is important in these busy times. Parents have work, kids have school and homework. Without scheduling a specific time, families might not get together much. There is no better time and place to be together than at the dinner table.

American culture can be very rushed and consumer-oriented. Everyone wants to buy the newest, coolest stuff. To do this, you need money—and this creates pressure to make money. With the economy down, some parents have to work two jobs to support their families and don’t have the time to eat a sit-down meal. We speed through life and sometimes become oblivious to the things that matter—like family. The traditional ritual of sharing a meal with your family has been replaced by meals to go. Why cook dinner—which would take a long time—when you can go to McDonald’s, buy one, eat it in five minutes, and be on your way? And have you heard of TV dinners? TV dinners are the best. There’s no prep time with your family in the kitchen!

The gap between adults and children has widened. As families spend less time together because of work and other commitments, relationships are lost. Children and teens need guidance from their parents as they go through childhood and adolescence. They learn almost everything from their parents—a lot of it by example—and they value what their parents have to say. So when kids see their parents adopt a hurried lifestyle, they think that this is the right way to live. I feel that making time for family is an important value to hand down to the next generation.

Cathy Garcia-Prats, an author mentioned in the YES! Magazine article, “You Are Who You Eat With,” says that dinner “lets us have an opportunity to share our day, be part of each others’ lives.” Sharing is a cherished part of my family’s dinner. We each have a chance to talk about our day and share funny stories or things that we learned. In our family of six, life is often busy with all of our different activities. The dinner table is one place that we can all be together without having to rush. It provides a way to connect and relate to each other’s day.

My family connects at the dinner table with games. One of our favorites is a boxed set of cards, each with a different challenge, like, “How many presidents can you name?” We pick a new card every night. My little sister especially enjoys them. We often hear her cry, “Let’s play a dinner game!” Games at dinner have connected us and stimulated discussion. I have learned cool things about my parents, like the fact that my dad used to work in a video arcade.

For me, eating with my family provides an essential part of what it means to be a family. We connect through stories and conversations about happiness and troubles. The dinner table is the perfect place to share. It is a great place to solve problems. My family has had countless discussions from current events to science to recent movies. Though our family, like others, has a life with some clutter and crazy, busy schedules, my parents have always made sure that we are all together for dinner. What better place to slow down the rush, close the generation gap, and share, than the family dinner table? The dinner table matters. Besides, where else would I have learned the names of all 44 presidents?!

Part 5: Sample Essays

Dinner at My House

By Hanna Walker, Grade 8

My family is made up of five people—my mom, dad, twenty-one-year-old sister, five-year-old brother, and me. I'm thirteen. We recently started eating together at the dinner table. I can already see a difference in how our family communicates with and supports each other. We are more organized, too!

Before my family started eating at the dinner table, we had to work hard to get together. Our life was chaotic. We were constantly late to school, family events, and sports practices and games. If there was a possibility of being late to an event, we were. Since we started eating together we have been on time and more organized as a family. I think that when we sit with each other at dinner we are more aware of what we are supposed to be doing, and where we are needed.

I agree with what Katherine Gustafson says in her article, "You Are Who You Eat With." "The more often teens have dinner with their parents, the more likely they are to report to their parent about what is going on in their lives." Communication between my parents and me has also improved a great deal since we started sitting together while eating dinner. My mom and dad have a better understanding of what I do in school and what I need help with. When I am feeling like I cannot finish an assignment my parents always say encouraging things like, "You are smart and you can figure it out." Sometimes I procrastinate about finishing work and my mom will say, "Just do it. You cannot get it done if you do not start."

The dinner table not only helps my parents and me communicate, but it also helps my little brother Gavin because he always has something to say or ask for. At the table, Gavin has a chance to speak what is on his mind with no interruptions and with all the attention on him. The other night, Gavin asked our parents if we could see the new Avengers movie. My parents didn't really like this idea because my brother

often gets in trouble for his Superhero fighting moves, but they said, "Maybe we can go if you don't do your dangerous Superhero moves." A few nights later, Gavin promised—in a quiet and serious voice—"I promise I won't do the moves during the movie." The dinner table was a safe place to work things out.

With five people, it can be hard to gather everyone, but dinner is a time during the day when all of us can spare 30 minutes. My brother Gavin is only five and is still learning the many things he needs to know. I found this excerpt from the article relevant to Gavin: "Family dinner also encourages the development of language skills and emotional intelligence in children." I have seen my brother grow in attitude and behavior since we started the habit of eating dinner together.

Eating together has expanded beyond my immediate family. My grandpa has started a tradition with my uncle, mom, and our families. Once a month, we gather together to try foods from different parts of the world. Like the article, we share traditions and dishes to learn more about other cultures.

Eating at the dinner table is probably the best thing that our family has chosen to do in a while. For me, it's a time to collect myself, especially with today's distractions. It's also a place where my family learns something new about each other—what's worrying them, or what makes them happy. It's an opportunity for all of us to slow down and get our life organized and on track.

My advice to people is eat together! As long as you enjoy the person, it does not matter who you eat with. It can be your family, your friends, a new neighbor, your teacher, or a new classmate. The dinner table brings together more than just people. It brings together stories, support, understanding for one another, and—the chance to see *The Avengers*!

Family Bonding: From Tabletops to Laptops

By Clara Lincoln, Grade 11

Before my parents' divorce, we ate dinner together every night at 6:30. Dad would make something spectacular like cheese pizza from scratch and cooked over the grill, and we would start by saying grace. Our version of grace involved holding hands and saying what we were thankful for that day. It could be, "I'm thankful I didn't have homework tonight," or, if you went last, you could say, "ditto." This custom greatly strengthened our bond as a family. After the divorce, I got to experience two different customs: we still had dinner together every night at Dad's house, but we didn't at Mom's. Instead we sat together in the living room with our respective laptops and ate whenever we wanted. As disjointed as this sounds, this was still family time. Family dinners are not the only way for families to be part of each other's lives; whatever shape or form, spending time together is important and beneficial to the whole family.

Before the divorce, at dinner we would share interesting stories from that day—even discuss things like politics or global warming. It was at the dinner table that I learned what the Electoral College was. As Katherine Gustafson said in the YES! Magazine article, "You Are Who You Eat With," these conversations definitely kept us involved in each other's lives; we were a family, not just people living in the same house.

Family dinners probably have a role in my personal success, too. I have always had a strong work ethic; I have turned in every single homework assignment for the past three years. This probably comes from the support and determination to succeed that my parents instilled in me from a young age. We always talked about my school projects and homework at dinner, and I got to hear how much they wanted me to succeed. Many of my friends don't eat dinner with their families, and these

same friends don't think their parents have faith in them.

My friends who don't eat dinner with their families are the same friends who eat out most often. Their parents give them money for food, and they end up eating at McDonalds or Panda Express. They say if they don't eat out, then they would have to make their own food at home. I am grateful that I can come home to healthy food. I have an incentive not to eat out: I don't want to ruin my appetite for dinner. Even at Mom's house, where we don't eat together at the same table, we still manage to eat healthy food. Mom, who isn't the most skilled cook, often makes delicious grilled cheese sandwiches or quesadillas. I understand why Katherine Gustafson says that being with family at dinnertime helps teenagers make better decisions about food.

Even though we don't always eat dinner at the same time, or sit around the same table, I get the same benefits at Mom's as I do at Dad's. We share our news of the day and interact with each other all evening. We frequently share funny pictures we find on the Internet, and crowd around one laptop to watch The Daily Show. Even this reminds me that my mom supports me and makes me feel connected to my family. This has been especially important after the divorce. It makes me feel like we are still a cohesive family. I don't feel we're lacking anything by not physically sitting around a table to eat. In fact, eating at the same time just wouldn't work with Mom's busy schedule.

At both my mom's and dad's houses, I get the experience of convening as a family at the end of the day. We discuss what happened that day, and make each other laugh. This has strengthened my determination to succeed in school as well as make better decisions about what to eat. Without this valuable time together,

Part 5: Sample Essays

(Clara Lincoln essay continued)

our family would have been more shaken by the divorce, and I wouldn't feel as grounded as I do. Though I can't predict what form it will take, I will make sure to give my children the same support that my parents gave me. And it all starts by eating together at the table—or around a laptop.

Brothers Around the Table

By Willis Reed, Edmonds Community College

In her YES! Magazine article, “You Are Who You Eat With,” Katherine Gustafson addresses the importance of not letting the tradition of eating dinner as a family become extinct. I agree that having dinner as a family is vital to keeping a family connected. To quote Gustafson, “At dinner, we bridge the gaps between us by sharing our food and the stories of our lives.” This holds true not only with my family, but also in the fire service. In the fire service, working together and understanding one another is paramount. Dinner is one of the best times for firefighters to build strong bonds that are critical when you are depending on one another to go home safe.

For the last few years I have been working around the fire service as a Fire Cadet. Throughout my training, I have had the opportunity to partake in and observe the ritual of dinner at the fire station. Around those big tables at dinner, stories and experiences are shared, and knowledge is passed down from generation to generation. I was riding along with the firefighters of Seattle Fire Station #17, located in the University District of Seattle, Wash., when I first realized the importance of dinners in the fire service.

I had arrived at the station at 7:00 a.m., right as the firefighters of “C” shift were coming on for their 24-hour rotation. It was a relatively quiet Sunday, warm and sunny. Only five emergency calls had come in. Ladder Company 9 was in charge of making dinner that day. At around 5:00 p.m., the crew of the Ladder Company started to prepare dinner. We were having pizza, and with 13 firefighters and me to feed they were going to have to make a lot. As they cooked, members from the other companies would drift in, help a little, talk, joke, and then drift out to do other chores around the station. As dinner neared completion, the “bell

hit.” The dispatcher came over the radio: “Medic response Engine 17, Medic 16, respond. . .” As we ran out the door to the trucks, the guys cooking said, “We will keep dinner warm.”

Once we returned, dinner was ready, and the old call, “Chow’s on!” echoed throughout the station. As the 13 firefighters came in and took their seats around the massive wood table, I could not help but smile. This was it—most people don’t get to do this. I was a guest at the table of the Fire Station #17 family, and—trust me—it is a family. We talked about everything—the last fire they had responded to, football, problems with kids, and even the flowers that they were going to plant in the station’s garden. It was the only time I saw all the firefighters in the same room at the same time the entire shift. Dinner brought the “firefighter family” together, to share and eat, just like you would at home. Once we were all done, it was time to clean up. There are unspoken rules at dinnertime clean up: the cook does not clean, and the new guy is always the first to wash the dishes.

On another visit, this time to Fire Station #2, I witnessed the same family atmosphere. Engine 2 was cooking. It was a quiet evening at Station #2, located on Battery Street in the Belltown neighborhood of Seattle. Tonight was barbecue night with hot dogs and hamburgers. It was one big party with all of the 12 firefighters at Station #2 laughing and telling stories, even though the crews had been running calls all day. Dinner was really the only time we had together, with the exception of Aid Car 2 receiving a call in the middle of dinner.

Dinner in the fire service is the cornerstone of working together and understanding one another. Without family dinners, the fire service would be more like a job and less like the brotherhood that it has become. Eating as

Part 5: Sample Essays

(Willis Reed essay continued)

a group leads firefighters to be more than just coworkers; it leads to being family, or as they call it, the brotherhood. A brotherhood forged around the dinner table.
