

Food, Inc.

Responses to Preparing for the Film

1. Students will have multiple responses to this question, and the range of responses will include personal, anecdotal issues as well as political awareness. They may reveal family experiences that put members of the family at risk for diabetes, or hypertension. Their political awareness might include knowledge of the controversies about genetically modified crops (GMOs), trans fats, product labeling, artificial ingredients or additives, as well as the costs of organic foods, especially in markets catering to a clientele that only buys organic foods. Students may share their awareness of the “buy local” movements, food recalls, neighborhood farmers’ markets. They may have strong opinions about vegetarian or vegan diets. Many of the issues raised in *Food, Inc.* will be familiar to students, but they will also learn in the film about frightening inadequacies in food safety and the problems or unwillingness of the US government to legislate corrections in growing, selling, and policing our foods.
2. Students' responses will undoubtedly vary. Some may describe agrarian or pastoral images of farms as big white frame houses with wooden red barns, tall silos, cows and horses grazing, chicken coups, pigpens, fields of crops, or orchards. Others may recognize that their produce is available year-round from Mexico or S. American countries and may picture foreign lands. A few students may have already seen this film or may be familiar with modern farms as factories, with rows upon rows of animals having no room to roam. Some may have read about or have seen images of animals treated inhumanely and of farms resembling factories.
3. With the costs of transporting crops to distant markets and the expenses of buying and maintaining sophisticated farming equipment, many students will understand the frustrations facing farmers who find it increasingly difficult to realize a profit in farming and to continue their family farming tradition. Further, some students will realize the difficulty of those farmers who must consider whether they will go through the long and expensive process to seek certification to have their soil and crops labeled “organic.” Students who live in states with a lack of natural rainfall will realize the fears of farmers who have insufficient water available for them to irrigate their fields and some students will show their awareness of farmers in these states who have bulldozed their growing fields and orchards. Students may be aware of the Monsanto corporation’s control of seed and the inherent costs for farmers who are regulated by this corporation. Ranchers are also frustrated by water shortages as cows consume many gallons of water from birth to slaughter. Further, some students must realize with most of the world eating less meat than their fathers did, the profits in raising steer have declined.
4. The title *Food, Inc.* suggests that food production is big business. The two terms seem an unlikely fit. The film's illustration of a cow with a barcode on its body underscores this incongruity. Pairing a necessity like "food" that connotes something natural, organic, and pleasurable with the business term "Inc." still seems strange and ominous to most people.

5. Students will reflect a range of responses to how much they think the government should be involved in food production. Students may know that some government assistance has given farmers help, subsidizing farmers to grow certain crops. They may have strong feelings about government assistance in paying some farmers to grow products deemed unhealthy, like tobacco, or surplus crops like corn whose availability and economy prompts it to be added to many foods, to consumer detriment. Most students will believe that our foods are scrutinized for safety and will believe that the government should and does inspect our foods. The information presented in this film will surprise many students, so this preparation question prior to screening the film is a good one to generate interest.

6. Most students will recognize how challenging it can be to find affordable food that is still healthy and of a high quality. Lots of parents struggle to feed their families, and a number of our students have qualified for food stamps and have shared their parents' concerns about the high costs of food. Many students will readily admit how difficult it is to resist quick and cheap ready-made foods and to avoid hidden sugars and fats. Others may express concern about the prevalence of tempting commercials advertising processed foods, snacks, and desserts. Some students may wonder how we can be certain that our foods are safe: free of bacteria, pesticides, and other toxins.

7. Students will express a wide range of experiences in responding to questions about any changes in their diets in the last three years. Many will report modifications in their choice of food because they are living away from families whose shopping and cooking influenced their eating habits throughout their junior high and high school years. Some students, inspired by peer pressure, may want to eat less, eat healthier foods, or even try a vegetarian or vegan diet. As young adults meet people from other cultures, their eating habits may change to incorporate the foods of their new friends. Some students may modify their diets to reflect new political awareness—buying locally and in season, buying organic foods, resisting chicken, pork, or beef because of slaughtering methods they have read about. Other students may admit that now that parents are no longer preparing their food, they may be eating on the run between school and work and therefore eating more fast foods and snacks rather than healthy meals.

Responses to Reflecting on the Film

1. The film opens with vibrantly colorful shots of farms that reflect our images of what farms are or should be: row upon row of healthy-looking, tidy crops, green grassy fields with healthy-looking cows grazing in them, red barns and silos, distant hills with leafy trees. Most of our images of farms stem from the belief that farms in America are family farms. The film starts with almost unnatural color as it reflects the images in our minds of the concept of an agrarian way of life. The film's voice-over informs the viewer that our notion of "farm" is a "pastoral fantasy" that is spun to keep us believing in it as we shop in the American supermarket.

Behind those hundreds of products available for purchase are the factories, the realities that strip us of our illusions. A “handful” of companies control what we eat and what we’re allowed to know about the production of food in the United States. A “deliberate veil” has been created between the images of farms that we have in our minds and how food actually is grown and processed. The film reveals that produce is harvested while still green and firm for easy handling, and it is then ripened with ethylene gas. Assembly lines process foods and animals with no regard for the workers on those lines and the animals they butcher. Poultry farms and cattle ranches have become emblems of the new American farm which is actually a factory where chickens live too close together in dark houses for their 49 days of life before they are slaughtered on assembly lines. The cattle, fed a diet of corn that is unnatural to their digestive systems, stand on feeding lots hoof- deep in manure that will go with them to the slaughter house assembly lines. The contrasts between our images of farms and the reality of factories that process what we eat could not be more profoundly different.

2. The unintended consequences of fast food restaurants are far-reaching and difficult to arrest or reverse. The food quality has clearly suffered because the emphasis is on producing and serving food cheaply so the quality is severely compromised, with only a few corporations controlling our food system and making dangerous decisions about our food. The food is ultimately highly processed and non-nutritious, loaded with salt, sugar, and fat. Fast food has resulted in limited food choices, unhealthy diets, and epidemic surges in Type 2 Diabetes, obesity, and heart disease. To prevent contamination and deadly bacteria, the animals are shot with antibiotics and the food filler is cleansed with ammonia, which inevitably compromise the quality of the food.

While the intention of fast food is to keep the cost low for consumers, the fast food industry also has reduced the cost of production by paying workers low wages, replacing humans with machines, using assembly lines to increase speed and uniformity, raising animals in limited space and poor conditions to save money, and undercutting the competition and alternatives to fast food. Consumers ultimately pay a price in their health and their quality of life for all of these cost-cutting procedures.

Clearly, the working conditions at restaurants and farms reflect these compromises. Fast food restaurants pay their workers low wages so employees often don't stay long at these jobs, find the work monotonous and the products uninspired, and aren't encouraged to be outstanding or innovative on the job. Uniformity, speed, and cost-cutting are valued over workers' job satisfaction. On the factory farms, the owners and managers feel intimidated by the corporations they serve. They have little say in their operation, are often forced to raise animals in windowless tunnels and overcrowded, unsanitary, inhumane conditions, and are in huge debt due to the expensive upgrades that the corporation requires. The work is so unpleasant and poorly paid that the factory farms often hire illegal immigrants and then will turn some of them over to the government to be arrested as criminals even though they have worked at these factories for 10-15 years. Ultimately, the managers are unable to complain or to make changes or improvements or their contracts will not be renewed.

3. The film captures in nauseating clarity the reality of today's chicken farm. One company, Tyson, controls almost all of the chickens grown in the country. The company even controls the way the chicken grows—in 49 days, from birth to death. The chickens live in overly crowded houses without windows; the animals do not see daylight in their short lives. They are engineered to grow quickly, so quickly that their internal bones lack sufficient strength to support their weight, intended to be about 5 pounds at slaughter because uniformly-sized birds mechanize the processing of their meat. Because of the overcrowding in the chicken houses, the animals become sick. To help keep them alive, antibiotics are mixed into their feed which permeates the meat that the shopper will consume. According to the film, even sick chickens are sent off to the food processing plant. The company that helps the former tobacco farmer convert to chicken farming charges her \$280,000 dollars or more for the building where the chickens will be housed and then demands upgrades for the building before the initial cost of the house is paid off. The typical grower with two chicken houses has borrowed over \$500,000. The farmer is in debt but is forced to do upgrades. As one grower put it, "The farmer has no say in her business; she is kept under the thumb of the corporation." The typical grower earns \$18,000 a year.

Workers at the plant, historically poor whites and African American men but now increasingly undocumented workers from as far away from the plant as 100 miles, are abused workers who are denied union representation. If they agitate, the border patrol comes to their homes to arrest and deport them, but not so many at each raid that the food processing assembly line will be disrupted. The owners of the company, the managers or CEOs, are never arrested for hiring undocumented workers. Students may wonder, after they have seen this film, if they will ever be able to cook or eat another chicken.

4. In the section cleverly entitled "A Cornucopia of Choices," Michael Pollan reveals that the food industry gives "the illusion of diversity" but that our choices all boil down to the same source--"so much is just the clever rearrangement of corn." The problem with subsidizing farmers to grow so much corn is that it motivates us to engineer more foods that contain corn products. Pollan reveals that "in the US, 30% of our land base is reserved for corn." Moreover, "90% of products contain corn or a soybean ingredient--or both." However, he adds that although "cows are not designed by evolution to eat corn but to eat grass," many ranchers do feed corn to fatten them and our government is trying to teach even fish to eat corn: "Corn is really cheap and corn makes animals fat quickly." Without a varied diet, animals develop resistant bacteria such as *E. coli* that can be deadly.
5. *E. coli*, the common name for *Escherichia coli*, is "a bacterium that occurs naturally in the intestinal tract of humans and animals, as well as in soil and water" (Pringle 74). Harmful *E. coli* develop under certain conditions and the bacteria can prove to be life-threatening or fatal. Cows are naturally grass eaters who have been conditioned to eat corn to grow fatter than they would on grass because corn, a government subsidized food which exists in surplus amounts, is cheap. There is some evidence that a mutant form of *E. coli* develops because cows are sickened from their unnatural corn diet and because cows stand in their manure on feed lots and are more susceptible to harmful pathogens. Further, cows that are slaughtered by the hundreds in huge slaughter houses bring the feed-lot manure into the processing plant and *E.*

coli is introduced into the food system. Thousands of slaughter houses once existed across the country, so smaller outbreaks of harmful E. coli could be caught and suppressed and the meat destroyed. Today, in the United States, there are only thirteen slaughter houses treating huge numbers of animals so there is a greater chance that an animal carrying a dangerous pathogen will be introduced to a significantly greater amount of meat and that processed meat will be more widely distributed before the harmful bacteria can be detected and recalled. Run off from factory farms also contributes to the rise of E. coli in produce and the harmful bacteria has been found in spinach and apple juice.

The medical significance is serious, and the political dimensions of handling both E. coli and an outbreak of the bacteria are equally serious because both business and government systems seems to deny support to control the problem. The case of Kevin Kowalcyk exemplifies what can go wrong if E. coli-tainted meat is not detected and recalled. His death from an E. coli-tainted hamburger occurred just twelve days from the day he consumed the meat. The film shows his mother and grandmother working as food advocates trying to get government support to legislate stiffer meat inspection laws and mandates for the meat industry to implement faster recall notices. The meat company that sold the tainted meat did not initiate a recall of the meat for 16 days after Kevin's death. As Mrs. Kowalcyk expresses it, "We put our faith in our government to protect us," but it doesn't. In fact, as the film shows, the government is powerless to fight the food lobbies. A 1998 law implemented testing for Salmonella and E. coli pathogens in food, but the food industries took the United States government to court and said that the government didn't have the authority to shut down plants that are repeated offenders in selling tainted foods. The USDA seems powerless to shut down factories with tainted products.

Kevin's Law was introduced as a direct offensive against that decision. As the film states: "Kevin's Law would give back to the USDA the power to shut down plants that repeatedly produce contaminated meat." For six years, Kevin's mother worked to gain power, through legislation, for the USDA. Kevin's mother insists that she would just like the company that sold the tainted meat to apologize for its tainted product and state that it has safeguards in place. Further political dimensions to the issue of food safety are apparent when the film shows that a USDA Chief was once the former head lobbyist for the beef industry. The political reality is that the heads of government agencies have had former relationships with the food industries that they are supposed to be scrutinizing.

6. The film reveals that the government is involved in subsidizing farmers to grow corn but then the government ends up needing to fund and reward corporations that invent new uses for corn. The government also has the responsibility for insuring that food and food processing plants and farms are safe and healthy for both people and animals. They also are expected to track down any contaminants, shut down plants that repeatedly fail certain standards and tests, and conduct investigations and pass legislation like "Kevin's law" to strengthen the government's ability to prevent contaminated meat and poultry from entering the food supply. In the film, Kevin's mother and grandmother are in Washington DC, urging the government to pass Kevin's law, prompted by the death of two-year-old Kevin Kowalcyk, who died 12 days after eating a hamburger contaminated with E. coli.

7. The film focuses on one working-class family and its food choices for one late afternoon. The family pulls into a drive-through restaurant (Burger King) and spends \$11.48 for seven sandwiches and drinks. The mother states, “We don’t think about healthy eating because we think everything is healthy. . . . Now that I’ve learned that the food is unhealthy, I feel guilty giving it to my kids. But we don’t have time to cook”

The family is then shown in a super market comparing the costs of broccoli and pears to the meals that they have just consumed in their car. A voice-over questions why a hamburger at a fast food place costs less than a head of broccoli. The film informs the audience that it’s not an accident that produce is more expensive than fast food items; the products that create many fast foods and snacks are subsidized by the government, for example wheat, corn and soy.

The film also informs the viewer that a single predictor of obesity is income level. Poor people, who believe that they don’t have time to cook and are overwhelmed by prices for vegetables and meat in the market, rely on fast foods that are unhealthy and high in calories. Bills for legislation to control costs and sizes of unhealthy foods, like sodas, have failed because of industry pressure. The food industries blame lack of control on the individual, but Michael Pollan believes the industries are “pressing our evolutionary buttons” by manufacturing foods that are high in salt, fat, and sugar—and we’re triggered to want them. They are readily available so we can get them in endless amounts.”

Diabetes is “epidemic” in the United States, evident even in children. The mother of the family followed in the film observes that their paychecks are too low to buy both healthy foods and the drugs that her husband needs to keep his diabetes under control.

8. Pictured outdoors on his tractor, among his cattle and pigs, and with a small crew of workers, slaughtering, cleaning, and bagging his own chickens, Joel Salatin is the owner of Polyface Farms, a family-run farm in Virginia. He is a voice against corporate agribusiness: "Everything we've done in modern industrial agriculture is to grow it faster, fatter, bigger, cheaper. Nobody's thinking about E-coli, type 2 diabetes, and the ecological health of the whole system. We're outsourcing autonomous farmer decision-making to corporate board rooms in big cities a thousand miles away where people make decisions and don't live with the consequences of those decisions."

Emphasizing that cattle are "herbivores," Salatin watches his grass-fed cattle grazing in the fields, at ease in a natural outdoor setting with plenty of space and fresh air. He moves fences to relocate his cattle after they have grazed on a field and fertilized it so that cows are not left to stand, as they are in a feed lot, hoof-deep in feces. His open, inviting farmlands contrast dramatically with the corporate windowless chicken coups seen on the film. His openness contrasts with all the corporations that refused to be interviewed for this project. Salatin explains: "The industrial food system became so noisy and smelly--not a person-friendly place--that the people who operate those plants don't want anyone to go there because people would see the dirty truth. When that occurred, then we lost all the integrity and all the accountability in the food system. If we

put glass walls on all the mega-processing facilities, we would have a very different food system in this country."

Salatin offers hope that there still are sustainable farms where animals are raised without hormones and antibiotics. Referring to such farms, Salatin insists, "We're every bit as efficient. We *can* feed the world." Salatin reveals that the USDA has tried to shut his farm down, claiming that Salatin's outdoor method of packaging the chickens is "unsanitary." However, his meat has been cultured repeatedly and proven to be so much safer than the corporate chickens that "have been through 40 chlorine baths." Salatin notes that his chickens haven't had any chlorine treatment and haven't needed it. Salatin is slaughtering chickens in small enough numbers that any contamination can be caught before consumers are sickened by dangerous pathogens.

Using "we" to refer to our country, Salatin reflects, "I'm always struck by how successful we have been at hitting the bull's eye of the wrong target. We've learned how to plant, fertilize, and harvest corn, using global positioning satellite technology, but nobody sits back and asks, 'Should we be feeding cattle corn?'" At the end of the film, Salatin reiterates that consumers can make a difference: "People have got to start demanding good, wholesome food of us and we'll deliver. We're very ingenious people--we'll deliver."

9. While Joel Salatin has no desire to be selling his farm products at WalMart, Gary Hirshberg, CEO of Stonyfield Farm, sees clear profits and marketing reforms implicit in selling healthy products, like his organic yogurt, to large food chains. His thinking has evolved from his earlier days where he saw business as the enemy polluting the world through its selling of evil products. But his former idealism of small farms and local markets has changed by what he sees as marketing success. His wisdom is we need to get the chain stores to buy what the consumers want and need, that is organic foods. He claims that his yogurt company does not need to be "David up Against Goliath; we need to be Goliath." His Stonyfield yogurt company, that started with 7 cows, was eventually built to one of the top yogurt suppliers and one of the most profitable in the country. It was acquired in 2008 by Danone, a food conglomerate, for \$23 billion dollars.

Conglomerates are shown as the solution to melding big businesses with the small, boutique crafted foods that can't make the profits that the bigger businesses can. A walk through a new and healthy food exhibition hall reveals that many have already been brought under the protective umbrella of Kraft, Pepsi, Kellogg, or Colgate. Those companies grow by acquiring the smaller company's product. When asked if the smaller companies "are able to keep their soul," Hirshberg's reply is that "the jury is still out." Hirshberg admits that he "dreamed of the day when [he] could sit with corporate titans and have conversations about organic foods." He is pleased to see that Walmart carries his products and acknowledges the wisdom that what customers want, Walmart wants—that is, organic foods. He recognizes that what drives Walmart is economics, not moral enlightenment, but he realizes that the "profound" reduction in the use of pesticides in our country is because Walmart and similar large markets are responding to consumers' preferences for organic foods—pesticide-free products. Hirshberg concludes that no one can argue against an organic product being sold by Walmart if it "helps to save the world."

10. The film explains how the Monsanto Corporation has not only developed a product called Roundup to kill weeds but also a genetically engineered soybean that can resist the

application of Roundup: "When the Roundup is sprayed over the top, it kills everything except the Roundup-resistant soybean." Monsanto has a patent on this soybean seed that has rapidly dominated the market and eliminated any public seeds. "In 1996, when Monsanto began selling Roundup-resistant soybeans, only 2% of soybeans in the U.S. contained Monsanto's patented gene. By 2008, over 90% of soybeans in the U.S. contained Monsanto's patented gene."

Initially farmers were "absolutely disgusted" that they could no longer save their own seeds and were being forced to use Monsanto's seeds, but they soon discovered that they cannot afford to fight Monsanto in court because of the high legal fees. Troy Roush, Vice President of the Corn Growers Association, spent \$400,000 in pre-trial costs to resist Monsanto, but finally had to settle out of court to avoid spending another million on court costs. Another farmer, David Runyan, spent \$25,000 in pre-trial fees before he also gave in and paid the fines. When seed cleaner Moe Parr was brought to court by Monsanto, he was horrified to discover that Monsanto had subpoenaed the records of anyone who had done business with him. Many ceased doing business with him and are no longer his friends. According to the film, Monsanto has a surveillance team of over 75 staff devoted to investigating and prosecuting farmers. Farmers also have a copy of Monsanto's lengthy "black list" of farmers who haven't been willing to share all of their records with Monsanto. In addition, farmers described Monsanto's intimidating investigators, bullying tactics, and constant lawsuits intended to scare farmers who don't use their seeds. Farmers revealed that they have even been threatened with lawsuits if their neighbors' Monsanto seeds end up blown into their fields. Farmer Troy Roush admits that he hated having to advise new farmers not to try and fight the Monsanto Corporation, but he had no choice: "Monsanto's control is so dominant. They have gained control of the food system." Worse still, so many affiliated with Monsanto are now serving Monsanto's interests in government positions. Eric Schlosser reveals, "In the last 25 years, our government has been dominated by the industries it was meant to be regulating."

11. A questionable relationship has existed between some specific governmental elected and appointed officials and the food industry, and the film shows problems for consumers and farmers as a result of this relationship. The film reveals the backgrounds of a number of specific government regulators who once represented companies on the other side of significantly questionable debates. For example, Clarence Thomas, a member of the Supreme Court, was once an attorney for Monsanto, and when the Monsanto seed-owning issue came to the Court, he decided in favor of Monsanto and against the farmers who wanted to save seed, as they always had done. Other apparent conflicts of interest exist and are exemplified in the film. The Chief of an FDA Branch office once worked in the laboratory at Monsanto, and an EPA Administrator also worked for Monsanto. Lawyers who represented Monsanto on genetically modified food labeling have gone on to work in government regulatory agencies. The film indicates that the FDA's decision not to label genetically modified foods, and the lack of open, public debate about the issues related to seed control, are results of the questionable relationship between business and government regulators.

The strong centralized power of biased regulators and huge corporations work against farmers who are trying to grow food and also against consumers who are kept in the dark about where their food is coming from and what it is doing to their bodies. The government is not insisting that the FDA search out the possible attendant health

problems of citizens eating cloned foods nor is it labeling the products so that consumers know the food has come from genetic modification. If consumers speak up, the food industry has protections in place to persecute and prosecute. Students may recall Oprah's response to the public disclosure of widespread Mad Cow disease and her televised exclamation that she wouldn't eat beef. The meat industry sued her for disparaging beef. While Oprah ultimately won the case, she was in litigation for 6 years and spent over 1 million dollars on legal fees.

12. The film concludes with the optimism that consumers can vote three times a day about the food they eat. The film also recommends that viewers take these concrete steps to ensure that more wholesome food is available to all:
 - Buy from companies that treat workers, animals, and the environment with respect.
 - When you go to the supermarket, buy organic foods and choose foods in season.
 - Read labels and know what's in your food.
 - Buy foods that are grown locally. The average meal travels 1500 miles from the farm to the supermarket.
 - Shop at farmers' markets and make sure that they accept food stamps.
 - Plant a garden--even a small one.
 - Cook a meal with your family and eat together.
 - Ask your school board to provide healthy school lunches.
 - Tell Congress to enforce food safety standards and laws.
 - For more information and updates, go to: takepart.com/foodinc