

# Culinary Compositions and First-Generation College Students: Why Writing about Food is a High-Impact Educational Practice

Franziska Tsufim, UC Irvine

## TOPIC

This case study looks at a summer bridge writing lab at a public research university that engaged students in the reading and writing of food memoirs. The project is part of a growing body of research that studies high-impact educational practices (HIPs) for their contribution to the retention of first-generation college students and other minorities historically underrepresented in Higher Education.

## PROBLEM STATEMENT

Writing courses are part of the growing list of HIPs designed to promote the academic success of diverse students. However, to date, there exists little data on what exactly makes a freshman writing course impactful.

## OBJECTIVES

- Drawing on existing research (Conefrey 2021; Kirby 2021; Soria 2012), the study defines “impact” as strengthening first-generation students’ academic writing skills and promoting their sense of institutional belongingness.
- The main objective of the study was to identify core features of an impactful freshman writing course.
- Specifically, building on research on food writing in college English classes (Waxman, 2008), the study addresses why writing food memoirs is an impactful experience for freshman writers .

## SoTL

Students in the class composed in two different genres:

- **Food memoirs (creative writing)**
- **Meta-cognitive compositions (reflective writing)**

The study analyzed both types of writing to:

1. assess students’ reflections on the food memoir writing process for references to institutional belongingness and self-development as academic writers
2. assess student food memoirs for recurring motifs and patterns to trace “structures of impact”

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Bradley Queen for sponsoring this study and for his invaluable contributions to the development of the study’s data assessment tools.

## REFERENCES

- Conefrey, T. (2021). Supporting first-generation students’ adjustment to college with high-impact practices. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*, 23(1), 139-160.
- Kirby, L. (2021). High-impact teaching practices foster a greater sense of belonging in the college classroom. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*.
- Soria, K. (2012). First-generation students’ academic engagement and retention. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 17(6), 673-685.
- Waxman, B.F. (2008). Food memoirs: what they are, why they are popular, and why they belong in the college classroom. *College English*, 70(4), 363-383

I found that students explore a full range of affect in their food memoirs to describe their complex personal and cultural identities (see table 1 below). Preliminary data suggests that giving first-generation students the opportunity to draw on the metaphorical richness of food to explore their identities is impactful: it improves their self-confidence as writers for the academy as well as their overall sense of institutional belongingness (see table 2 below).

	Positive connotations	Negative connotations
<b>Affect in student food memoirs</b>	good, tasty, delicious, fulfilling, special, meaningful, appealing, authentic, perfect, simple, indulging, revitalizing, nutritious	terrible, unhealthy, disgusting, fearful, unappealing, frustrating, dull, weird, indigestible
<b>Identity categories in student food memoirs</b>	comfort, wholeness, attachment, memorability, permissibility, being cared for, nostalgia, connection, assimilation, bonding	Being cut off, detachment, deprivation, minority status, prohibition, shame, guilt, longing, refusal, assimilation

**Table 1: Student references to affect and identity in their food memoirs**

	Before engaging with food memoirs	After engaging with food memoirs
<b>Students’ relationship with academic writing and the university</b>	Weakness, intimidation, embarrassment, dislike, struggle, nervousness, imposter syndrome, trauma, frustration, alienation, marginalization, worry, loneliness	sense of achievement, vulnerability as a source of power, connection, identification, community, bravery, enjoyment, hope, passion, pride, excitement, rhetorical know-how, inspiration, relationship building, discovering similarities with others

**Table 2: Student reflections on the impact of food memoir writing**

## AT A GLANCE

### QUESTION

- What makes a freshman writing course “impactful” for first-generation college students?
- Specifically, why is food memoir writing a high-impact educational practice?

### SAMPLE

This case study focuses on a 5-week Summer Bridge online writing course at a public research university that enrolled 20 freshmen from across all disciplines. Roughly 85% of the students in the course identified as first-generation students. For the purpose of the study, the designation “first-generation” applies to students who self-identified on enrollment as children of parents without a 4-year college degree.

### METHOD

To trace a “structure of impact” in student writing, the study adopted a qualitatively coded data analysis tool from applied linguistics. Using a code book, specifically developed for this study, to assess student writing, the analysis focused on three categories: Student food memoirs were assessed for references to affect and identity. Students’ reflective assignments were studied for references to the impact of food memoir writing (defined as institutional belongingness and academic skills). The code book was tested by all members of the research team to ensure data replicability.

## CONCLUSIONS

The preliminary data obtained from the analysis of student food memoirs shows that writing about food invites a broad range of affect that allows first-generation students to engage with their oftentimes complex personal and cultural identities. It further suggests that engaging with the metaphorical richness of food to explore questions of identity is an impactful practice. In this course, food memoir writing helped first-generation students to improve their self-confidence as writers for the academy, as well as their overall sense of institutional belongingness. Thus, students benefitted from exploring their personal relationship with food and identity to write their way into the scholarly discourse community.