



Lesson 10

Decoding Food Labels

[Lesson Duration: 50 minutes]

Social Studies

Health

FACS



Lesson Overview

Food products are labeled with words like “natural” and “humane,” and some are certified as USDA Organic or gluten free. Students will learn how to read and critically interpret common food labels, review who regulates and verifies the accuracy of these labels, and create their own food labels.



Learning Objectives

- Explore the common types of food labels and how to interpret them.
- Identify who regulates and verifies the accuracy of food labels.



Essential Questions

- What should consumers know about their food?
- How can consumers tell whether a food label is trustworthy?
- How could food labeling be improved?



Materials

- Flipchart paper or poster board
- Markers
- Sample food labels (provided)
- Presentation slides
- Teacher guide
- FoodSpan Infographic



Resources

- *Food Marketing and Labeling* primer (www.foodsystemprimer.org/food-and-nutrition/food-marketing-and-labeling/)

Warm-up

Main Activities

Wrap-up

Extensions

Warm-up: What Don't You Know About Your Food?

Social Studies, Health
[10 minutes]

Help students brainstorm a list of all the information they would ideally like to know about their food before buying it. Ask: *What don't you know about the food you eat?* For example, what dairy products are in the orange powder from boxed macaroni and cheese? What parts of the animal make up a hot dog? Can breakfast cereal really “support your child’s immunity?” Explain that food labels are one way we get this information, but they can be hard to interpret and sometimes misleading.

Tape each **Sample Food Label** onto a piece of **flipchart paper** and post them around the room. Have students examine each label and mark the flipchart paper with a checkmark (trust), question mark (uncertain), or “X” (mistrust) to indicate their level of trust in that label. As a class, discuss:

- *What is this label telling you or not telling you?*
- *Why is this label trustworthy or untrustworthy?*
- *Does this label help answer any of the questions you had about what is in your food?*

Main Activity: Decoding Food Labels

Social Studies, Health, FACS
[15 minutes]

Students will explore which labels on food packages are regulated, which are trustworthy, and which are used as marketing tools. Ask: *What information about food should companies be required to show on a package?* This could be nutrition information (e.g., calories per serving), where the food was produced, etc. List their responses on the board.

Ask: *How do we know which food labels are trustworthy?* Explain that some people may assume everything on food labels is regulated, but that is not always the case. Many labels are misleading and are used to market products rather than inform consumers.

Display the **slides**. Guide students through the types of food labels and information the government requires using the **Slides Teacher Guide**. Discuss:

- *Do the food labels required by the government offer enough information about your food? If not, what information is missing?*
- *Which food labels are most trustworthy? How do you know?*
- *Which labels look misleading? Why?*
- *Are there any food label claims that the government should regulate more strictly? Why or why not?*

Main Activity: Create Your Own Food Label

Social Studies, Health
[20 minutes]

Have students form groups and assign each group one of the following food types: breakfast cereal, energy bar, soup, beverage, frozen dinner, canned fruit/vegetable, packaged snack, bread or baked good, salad dressing, or pasta. Using **markers** and **flipchart paper** or **poster board**, each group will design the packaging for its product, which may include:

- Name of the product
- Quality claims (e.g., triple-washed, fresh)
- Animal welfare or environmental claims (e.g., dolphin-safe)
- Nutrition claims (e.g., no trans fat, fortified with iron)
- Health claims (e.g., boosts immunity)
- Social justice claims (e.g., fair trade)
- Factors differentiating product from competition (e.g., 50% less sugar)

Each group will pitch their product to the class. After each group presents, ask the class:

- Which label claim do you think is the least trustworthy, and why? Which is the most trustworthy?
- Does the package and its label claims make you want to buy the product?

Wrap-up: Why is Food Labeling Important to Me?

[5 minutes]

Have students write a journal entry in response to the prompt: *Why is food labeling important to me as a consumer? How does it affect me?* If time allows, have students share their responses.

“By [Kellogg’s] logic, you can spray vitamins on a pile of leaves, and it will boost immunity.”

*–Kelly Brownell,
epidemiologist
and obesity expert*



Kellogg's has been criticized for making controversial label claims about its products. In 2009, a claim about boosting immunity (pictured) was discontinued after public health advocates challenged its validity.



Share Your Knowledge: Ask students to share what they've learned by tweeting tips for interpreting food labels. Tag **#foodlabelfacts** and **#foodspan** to join the conversation.

Extensions:

Revisiting the Infographic (Social Studies)

Distribute copies of the **FoodSpan Infographic** (students may already have their own from previous lessons). Ask students to identify parts that represent food labeling. Ask: *Do these accurately represent what we learned about food labeling? If not, what could we add to make the infographic more accurate?* Working individually or as a class, have students draw their own versions, create a collage, or add images to the existing infographic. Share photos of students' work on social media and tag #foodspan.

Food Labels PSA Project (Social Studies, Health)

Students will create public service announcements (PSAs)—in poster, booklet, video, or other form—on how to critically assess claims on food labels. PSAs will offer at least three pieces of information about how to interpret food labels and find reliable information. Encourage students to share their PSAs on social media using #foodspan and #foodlabelfacts.

Food Labeling History Project (Social Studies, Health, ELA)

Students will research the history of a specific food label, such as USDA Organic, gluten free, or kosher. In a two- to three-page report, students will answer these questions: *Why was the label created? What standards does the label uphold? On what foods does this label appear? Are there critiques of the label? Does the label provide useful, credible information? Could this label be improved?*

Food Label Tracking (Social Studies, Health)

Students will track the kinds of claims they find on food labels throughout a week, keeping a journal with the following information:

Name of the product

- Quality claims (e.g., triple-washed, fresh)
- Animal welfare or environmental claims (e.g., dolphin-safe)
- Nutrition claims (e.g., no trans fat, fortified with iron)
- Health claims (e.g., boosts immunity)
- Social justice claims (e.g., fair trade)
- Factors differentiating product from competition (e.g., 50% less sugar)

Students should include claims from at least five foods or drinks, and note which ones they found most and least trustworthy, and why.