An Investigation of Recipes

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In this article, Langstaff looks deeper into the genre of recipes. She searches for what may be taken for granted in, or missing from, various recipes and how that might be connected to assumptions about antecedent knowledge and antecedent genre knowledge. She uses many different examples and research methods (including baking) to test her research theory and attempts to investigate the reception of specific recipes as well.

I had been wondering about the genre of recipes for a while but mainly considering: What is taken for granted about a recipe, and why? To try to explain what I mean here further, I think that there are things taken for granted when it comes to recipes, both by the authors as they write them and by the audience as they use them. For example, an author may not take into consideration that the audience may use different units of measurement when writing a recipe, or the audience may not be precise while following the recipe. I wanted to know more about this, and I wondered why this happened. I thought maybe some of this might be related to what authors of recipes assumed the readers already know, and that maybe some of this was based on the recipe user's preferences and prior experiences. In order to try to figure this out, I set out to research recipes further.

To begin my research into this topic, I first started by looking into some background and historical information about recipes. I began by searching online for the history of recipes. My English Language Arts teacher, Mrs. Kieffer, directed me to a website that discussed what I was looking for (see Figure 1). I found that the first recipe recorded, according to Lynne Olver, was from 10,000 BC. It was for flour, bread, and soup. According to Olver,

"The first soup recipe was recorded in 10,000 BC. This recipe originated in France, but up until the 18th century, it was not served in restaurants.". In the first century, recipes started to become more popular. On this website, Olver has listed twelve different food recipes, as well as Bible era food recipes, and recipes from ancient Rome. I decided to look deeper into these recipes to find out their origins and any other background information.

Figure 1: A screenshot image showing the first recipe recorded.

I started to read into the flour recipe first. The website said that, "The flour recipe originated from an Azilian culture of southern France, where it was first used to grind pigments. The first recorded bread recipe originated in Ancient Egypt" (Olver 1). At first, the breads were grainy and hard. I have tried the bread made from this recipe from a past lesson about food in the early times. It was not very appetizing.

For some, a recipe may not be a term that they are familiar with. Recipes are "a set of instructions for making or preparing something, especially a food dish" ("Recipe"). Now for an in-depth look at this term. On *Dictionary.com* it states, "Origin of this name: Latin term that originated from the term receive. Late Middle English is where this term came from after changing from Latin roots" (Recipe). Recipes are usually used regarding cooking or baking. A set of instructions to build something is also considered a recipe.

While the human race was still evolving, there was not a known way for the humans to write recipes. Instead, when they found something edible (whether it needed to be cooked or not), they would eat it. Mostly everything was eaten raw. Nowadays, it is written on every menu at every restaurant that eating raw meat may cause sickness! "At about 1,400,000 BC to 500,000 BC, Neanderthals started to use fire" (Olver 1). (In my mind, fire can be compared to a huge present. Not only is food more nutritious because of fire, we are also less likely to get sick from food-borne bacteria.

Cooked food tends to taste a whole lot better, too.) Instead of recording recipes, which was not possible at the time due to their lack of knowledge and tools, they would follow the same basic food diet of whatever they could find that was edible. People would communicate and visually show each other their way of cooking, although it may have been a pretty easy concept: find food, cook over fire if possible, eat. Now that I had learned a little bit more about the history of recipes, I was ready to get back to my overall research question.

Beginning the Search

To begin my search to figure out my research puzzle of what may be taken for granted in a recipe and why, I chose to go to my favorite recipe site, *Allrecipes.com*, to see if I could find out anything by looking at an online recipe and the comments included. I chose to go with the most classic dessert recipe (in my opinion) out there: the chocolate chip cookie. I started by going through the recipe itself, to see if I could find what information might have been left out by the author. That may not seem important, but really it is because it shows what the author took for granted about their audience and what they would already know. I think that when people create recipes, whether they realize it or not, they make assumptions about the readers' (or audience's) antecedent knowledge. I learned in class that **antecedent knowledge** is basically all of the stuff you already know.

While looking at the first recipe I noticed that, the author, ELIZABETHBH, thought ahead and gave the Celsius and Fahrenheit degree measurements, which told me that she didn't assume her audience was only people in the United States. I decided then to move on to the comments to see what people using this recipe thought. These cookies have an overall four-and-a-half-star rating on a five-star scale, so I was expecting a majority of the feedback to be positive. I then went to look at the low-rated reviews to see if their comments would show me if I missed anything that was left out of the recipe (something the author took for granted that their audience would know), or what the audience might have missed. Most low-rating reviews were one sentence, such as "I wouldn't make these again" (Best Big, Fat, Chewy Chocolate Chip Cookie). The other low-rated reviews were pretty much based on preference, such as "too sweet" (Best Big, Fat, Chewy, Chocolate Chip Cookie). The people who didn't like what they made said the cookies were too dry, or crunchy, which I think are really about preference. But one thing that I have learned from my own experience in baking is that everyone's ovens are different, so changing the cooking time according to your oven is key when baking or cooking to assure you get the

finished product that you hope for. Therefore, I wonder if that is something that is taken for granted in this recipe: the cooking/baking time of something depends on the type of oven you have, which is a tip that is not usually included in recipes. It is something that the author takes for granted that the audience already knows.

Later, as I was researching on *FoodNetwork.com*, I chose to research the vanilla cupcake. I read through the recipe, and this one did not include the Celsius temperatures, but instead just the Fahrenheit temperatures. Although this may be an easy conversion using Google, it may also stop some of the intended audience from using this recipe. Like the last one, this recipe does not guide the reader to be observant of their own ovens and baking/cooking times. The recipe I looked at was very descriptive and gave lots of detail, which is usually a convention of this genre, but very helpful as well. Moving on to the comments, I chose, once again, to focus part of this study on the so-called negative reviews, so that I could see what may have been left out of the recipe or taken for granted that the reader or author overlooked. The first comment I read said, "I do not recommend this recipe. The "cupcakes" come out so dry and they taste like cornbread but worse!" (Food Network Kitchen). This comment was kind of general, but I did find one more saying almost the exact same thing. However, I couldn't find any more reviews saying that they didn't like the outcome. Even so, my study is not so much on taste, but more on what is taken for granted. In this case, while most reviews gave a four-five star rating, these two reviews stated the cornbread comparison. I wondered whether the cupcakes may have turned out like cornbread because of either not following the steps given in the recipe, or that they overmixed/undermixed the batter. From this website, then, I added to my list of things that might be taken for granted by the author: the idea that the audience will already know how long to mix the batter. It's not always listed in the recipe as a step, and when it's not, people usually judge how long to mix things based on their own prior experience.

Later, as I was looking through another recipe website, *Food.com*, I was trying to choose another recipe to look at. After looking at two dessert recipes on the other two websites, I opted to research a more savory dish. I was trying to change up the type of recipe, so I could get a better feel of what other people think about recipes for different types of foods. Plus, I was also looking for what may be left out of a dinner- or lunch-time recipe, instead of sweets (which may not appeal to everyone). I kind of looked around the site for a few minutes to just take it all in. Finally, an idea came to me. I decided on chicken potpie, a classic dinner meal that even the pickiest of eaters, my sisters, enjoy. I went with the recipe titled "Homemade Chicken Pot Pie" (breezermom).

Figure 2: Example picture by breezermom of the final product
from her recipe.

This recipe had some really amazing pictures, which I thought may be a good way to get your reader to choose your recipe (see Figure 2). Including pictures of the process (and the final product), which is what breezermom did, shows the reader how their potpie is supposed to look. If you have a reader who is inexperienced, pictures are not only guiding, but also very helpful. After a mouth-watering couple of minutes looking at the pictures, I got to work. The author of this recipe only included the Fahrenheit temperature, which may be a problem for people using the metric system. Moving down the recipe, the author of this recipe did not include a lot of detail in their steps, so maybe the pictures made up for that, but I was not so sure since I did not end up making this recipe myself. Even though this recipe seems pretty easy to follow, someone who is not skilled in cooking may disagree due to lack of detail, which could impact the final product. This recipe also did not include that you should watch your cooking time based on your oven, but it did say "Bake for forty minutes or until crust is golden brown" (breezermom).

Then I went to *The Pioneer Woman* website, because I, personally, love her show. I picked a recipe titled "Mexican Layer Dip" (Drummond). Now, her recipe is a lot different than the others. She doesn't just have lists of ingredients, steps, and such, but instead she states every ingredient/step and has a picture with it (see Figure 3). As I was reading through this recipe, there seems to be nothing she really left out, which may be because it doesn't have to be cooked/ baked (besides stove top heating things up, but that is the same for almost anyone who knows how to work the stove). As I scrolled all of the way down, I noticed that she has the conventional recipe at the bottom of the page as well, which includes lots of detail. Then, I started looking at the comments/reviews again to see what other people think. Well, the first comment I saw was of someone referring to her as "P-dub!!!" (Drummond). This made me laugh a little bit and sort of reminded me of a sport's team nickname. No one seemed to have any bad experiences with this recipe, so that's pretty good for the author and audience.

3/4 cup grated sharp cheddar. I like grating it myself...but you don't have to.

Figure 3: Example of a picture for each step of recipe.

Trying New Tactics

To better understand others' reception of a recipe, I decided to make a survey for my forty-three other classmates to take. **Reception** helps to explain how an audience perceives or understands something, which was important to take a look at because it would really help out my research. Forty-two of the forty-three students responded. The questions were based on if they made something (food or constructed). Either way, a recipe or a set of instructions was used. I first asked if they thought someone's reception of a recipe was important. As expected, all but a few, thirty-nine students of the forty-three, said yes (see Figure 4 below).
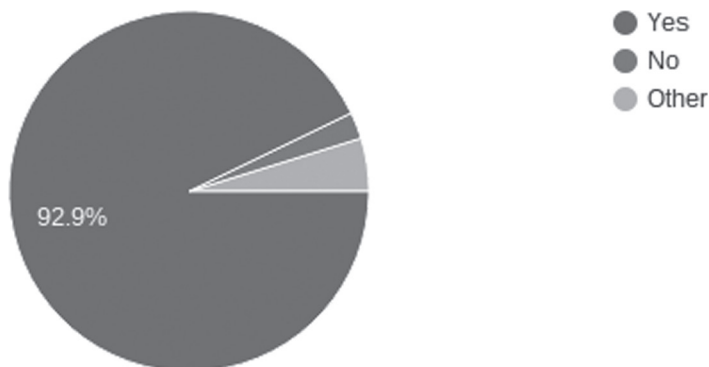

Figure 4: Pie chart showing results from question 1.

I also asked my classmates what their reception of what they made was so that I could take a look to see if their reception had something to do with the recipe they followed. This was to help me find out if there was anything that my classmates may have taken for granted about the set of instructions they followed. Twenty-nine students of the forty-three said that their reception was good, and their product came out as expected, while eight didn't, and one responded with a completely random response, "January Babies" (see Figure 5 below).

Them Brownie were rad
yes
Itr went as EXPECTED
Yep
Yes, my Ramen Noodles turned out ok.
I turned out as expected
It turned out expected, good.
Yes, it turned out how I expected
Yes.
January Babies
It went as planned.
No. It went a totally different direction. Although the food was still great!
Yes, it turned out fine.
Yes it did
No, the cheese didn't melt and I wanted to eat it then.
Yes it did. I cook quite a bit so by now I know what to expect and how to do things. Sometimes I just throw things together to see what happens and from there I experiment.
It did turn out the way I expected.
no it tastes terrible

Figure 5: A portion of my results, including the random response.

Some people who said that they followed a recipe regarding cooking/baking then stated that they followed a recipe that they usually use, or that they have been cooking/baking for a while so they know what they're doing, similar to antecedent knowledge. The remaining said that their product turned out OK, while only a few said that they completely failed. The people who followed a set of instructions regarding building something mostly said it turned out as planned. Whether they built Lego sets or something requiring more effort or skill, each person said that it had turned out as planned, and that the set of instructions they used was good. Overall, I would say that my results showed me that the recipes that my classmates followed did not leave out any major steps or other things, which I had hoped. There may have been some things that they realized that were taken for granted in their set of instructions, which may have impacted their final product, but I thought it was safe to assume that this idea did not cross most people's minds. For example, if you're baking brownies, and you have a conventional oven that uses Fahrenheit temperatures, you will not think twice about why a recipe only includes Fahrenheit because you're used to using just that. That is what makes the research question I am trying to figure out so tricky: people just might not notice what is missing or taken for granted in the recipe.

The Test

As I was looking through a cabinet in my house, I found a cookbook from when I was really into baking and cooking. Then I thought to myself, "this will help me get some more information; plus, I have an easier time comprehending things I can read in paper copy than I can online." I was

hoping to find some things that I hadn't found in my previous research online. I began by just reading and flipping through the cookbook to see if I found anything out of the ordinary, or interesting. I chose a recipe titled "Chocolate cake" from *The Cookbook for Girls* (Smart 84). This recipe not only included step-by-step instructions, but it also had a picture for each step. I really liked how this recipe was set up because it included so much detail but was also understandable and easy to read. I also liked how eye-catching it was, which seems important to making sure that your recipe stands out.

What I found really interesting about this recipe was that it included alternative measurements for people not living in the United States, which is something I didn't see in other recipes during my previous research. This recipe also included the Celsius cooking temperatures. In my research I found that most authors do not include the metric system measurements or the Celsius temperatures, in their recipes. I guess that maybe this means that the authors take for granted who their audience will be. Although this may not seem like a big deal, if someone from a different country wanted to make this recipe they may have trouble finding the correct measurements for the system that they're using. This may make the person decide to just not make this recipe, or to leave a negative comment, which is not a good thing when you want their reception of your recipe to be good.

After analyzing this recipe, I decided to go ahead and follow it to see what results I would get. I followed all of the steps as carefully as I could, hoping to get the best results possible. I also chose not to substitute any ingredients, as I have found that some people do sometimes when making recipes. When making this recipe, there were some things that I had to look up, such as how to convert ounces to tablespoons. This wasn't hard for me, but it was a thing that the author took for granted that people using the recipe would already know how to do. I also realized if someone wanted to make cupcakes instead of cake, they wouldn't know how much time to bake for because there wasn't information given for different cooking times for making cupcakes rather than cake. So, I chose to just keep an eye on them. Next, I realized that the recipe didn't include the tip "different ovens vary cooking time." (However, the recipe did include a tip that they can be served warm with ice cream!) Overall, this recipe turned out very nicely. The pictures helped to show me what the batter should have looked like, and I got some pretty good results, but not in regards to how it tasted. I, personally, thought the taste was not very chocolatey and was missing something.

I then wanted to ask my family members for their opinions of my final product to see if they agreed with me on this. My brother stated, "Do I have to eat another bite? Not the greatest, it has a weird taste." Well, off to my younger sister, who said "LOVE IT! Tastes amazing, moist." So, we have

one "go" and one "no." I also wanted my other two sisters' and my dad's opinions. As I received the feedback from my sisters, one said, "I've had way better," while the other said, "WISH I COULD HAVE TEN OF THEM. I loved the feeling, flavor, fluffiness, color. It's awesome!!" (And *yes*, she did actually yell the first sentence.) My dad stated, "It tastes bland, needs more flavor" (Langstaff Family).

Overall, from my family members' opinions, I wasn't really able to get a better understanding of this recipe. If you asked me, I would conclude and advise people that the amount of cocoa powder in this recipe is not enough to flavor the cupcakes appropriately. But, some people in my family felt differently. When thinking about if this might relate to what may be taken for granted in a recipe, I realize that this isn't really about what the author thinks the reader already knows though. This (the amount of cocoa powder) is really about preference, which I don't think the author of a recipe can entirely plan for.

When working with a genre that you are familiar with, you sort of get used to its conventions, and you just expect it to be the same all of the time. I learned in class that there is a term for this, it is **antecedent genre knowledge**, which basically means what you already know about a genre from your previous experience with it. But, there are things you may not realize when working with the genre over time because you just think it will always be the same, when in reality, things are always changing about every genre. This happens because all authors write in their own way, and what may be normal for one, is the total opposite of another. By reading further into the genre of a recipe and taking a look at what may be taken for granted, I found a lot of information that I hadn't realized before. If you're going through the activity of following a recipe, you're probably not thinking about the conventions, what's missing, what other people think, and things like that. Mostly, or at least for me, I just hoped the product came out as planned. This leads to my conclusion that, although what might be taken for granted about a recipe (either by the author or by the audience) may not cross your mind, it's definitely there, even though you may not notice.

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