

A Great British Baking Adventure: Antecedent Knowledge, My Dog, and a Dry(ish) Cherry Cake

Ashton Myerscough

Baking (in her kitchen at least) is a grand experiment. In this article, Ashton Myerscough explores how bakers use their uptake skills and baking antecedent knowledge to tackle super vague baking challenges in *The Great British Baking Show*. To do this, of course, she must experiment with one of the recipes from the show herself—here’s hoping it’s edible!

“On your marks, get set, BAKE!” I started watching *The Great British Baking Show* (*TGBBS*) the summer after I graduated college (AND got married a few weeks after I graduated . . . yeah, it was a lot). In a huge season of transitions, there was something about watching bakers jump into a tent (yes, a massive tent filled with ovens), in some gorgeous place in rural England, and make amazing (and sometimes downright disastrous) desserts that had me completely hooked. The truth is, I was traversing through this new space of what-happens-after-I-leave-school that I had no idea how to navigate. I had been given some tools from school, of course, and some life lessons I learned along the way, but just like the bakers on the show, I felt thrown into this completely new environment where I had to do a lot of, well, *improvising*.

So anyway, I’m sure you can picture me that summer: chilling on my secondhand couch I nabbed off Facebook Marketplace, snuggled up with my thick sausage-shaped beagle (and many other pets shown in Figure 1), watching *TGBBS* on repeat to avoid thinking about all those job applications I needed to fill out. And although a lot has changed between now and then, one thing hasn’t changed: my beagle is still chunky. Oh yeah, and we’re



Figure 1: My sausage beagle and the rest of the TV snuggling crew.



Figure 2: An artsy picture of an Italian crème cake I made this past spring for a birthday.

also still watching *TGBBS* nonstop together. And since then, the show has inspired me to bake all sorts of desserts for family and friends. I've attempted common recipes like lemon cupcakes and some more obscure, classic recipes, like an Italian crème cake for my mother-in-law's birthday (Figure 2). I'm still an amateur baker (and let me tell you, my toddler-level piping skills could use *a lot* of work) but I think that's the fun thing about baking—you don't have to be super talented to just jump in with some basic ingredients and try out a new recipe.

British Baking and Paul Hollywood's Coveted Handshake

If you haven't seen *TGBBS*, drop everything you're doing and get on Netflix pronto. But just in case you're reading this article for homework, and quality British television isn't on your priority list right now, here's

a quick synopsis: Each season, *TGBBS* features twelve amateur bakers that compete in different baking challenges to win a classic Paul Hollywood handshake or an approving comment from Mary Berry (and later in the series, the cynical Prue). In each episode, the bakers must compete in three different challenges: a signature bake, a technical bake, and a showstopper bake. In the signature bake, bakers make a classic recipe with a personal twist to impress the judges. In the technical challenge, bakers get a vague recipe from one of Paul's or Mary's cookbooks and try to reproduce the baked good with limited information. Last, the bakers must produce a showstopper bake that has to impress the judges with excellent flavors and decorative detail.

How We Use Antecedent Knowledge When Baking New Stuff

Fast forward to this semester: We started learning about this thing called antecedent knowledge and how it affects us learning new things. I like to

think of **antecedent knowledge** as the mental “luggage” you bring with you when you travel to new places—while the stuff you packed with you from home can be super helpful (like your toothbrush!), it sometimes is not helpful at all. After all, did you *really* need seven pairs of shoes for a weekend trip? Antecedent knowledge is what you *already* know, and a lot of times, you apply it when you find yourself in new, unfamiliar situations.

Anyway, I was sitting in class, and one of my classmates says to me, “You know, all this stuff we’re learning about antecedent knowledge reminds me a lot of baking a new recipe. You use the knowledge you already have about baking to try a new recipe. Sometimes our past knowledge helps us, and sometimes it isn’t super helpful, and we need to learn new ways of baking stuff.” OK, maybe that’s not *exactly* what she said, but that’s what I heard, and that’s all that matters, right? This was my first “aha!” light bulb moment for understanding the concept of antecedent knowledge.

Later, when I was at home chilling and watching *TGBBS* as per my usual, I was smacked with my second antecedent knowledge light bulb. Since I started watching *TGBBS*, my favorite part of the show has been the technical bake challenge. No matter how confident or prepared a baker acts at the start of the show, the technical bake challenge will have them on their knees praying in front of their ovens for something they made to turn out edible.

The technical bake is the biggest challenge for bakers because it’s the *only* challenge in the show they can’t prepare for. For this challenge, the bakers are given a sketchy list of ingredients and a few extremely vague instructions on how to bake the thing. The how-to steps of the recipe intentionally omit key information about how to bake the thing, too—like how long something should be baked, how it should look, and more. There are no pictures (eek!), and they aren’t offered any help from the judges, so if they have no experience baking the recipe, they are usually in rough shape. Sometimes the judges are kind enough to give measurements for the ingredients they are using, but later in the season, they don’t provide any help for the bakers. And these recipes aren’t your average let’s-make-a-biscuit kind of recipes, but are usually obscure, older recipes that no one knows the name of and that came out of the ancient cookbooks of Paul and Mary.

While Paul and Mary calmly eat the finished product from the first round/signature bake over a steaming cup of tea, the bakers are anxiously trying to make sense of the super vague recipe in the time limit they have been given. Many times, a baker’s first comment about the challenge is, “I’ve never heard of a [weird name of baked good] before,” which must be a terrible feeling—being asked to bake something on public television

that you haven't even *heard* of before. But the challenge seems to turn in a baker's favor when they say, "You know, this recipe reminds me of . . ." And for them, it's the "aha!" moment where their antecedent knowledge about baking kicks in and goes to work for them.

For example, for a technical challenge, maybe the bakers are asked by Paul and Mary to bake this bread called babka, and none of the bakers have heard of it before. But, despite the lack of understanding when it comes to making babka, the bakers *have* baked other kinds of bread before, so they have antecedent knowledge about bread baking stored up in the back of their heads. So, based on their antecedent knowledge about their past bread-making experiences, they may make the new bread—babka—in a similar way.

Sometimes, a handful of bakers even decide to *ignore* the recipe's instructions and follow their antecedent knowledge instead, which I found to be super interesting. So, based on their antecedent knowledge about baking a certain thing, bakers may *take up* the recipe instructions in different ways.

This is an example of **uptake**, by which I mean the way we think about new ideas until they make sense to us (ISU Writing Program).

Antecedent knowledge, and how bakers take up that knowledge, can leave them making some interesting decisions in the heat of the kitchen, with sometimes excellent and other times disastrous results. But in my quest to fully understand the antecedent knowledge the bakers utilize in the tent, I had to set up an experiment with one of the technical challenges myself.



Figure 3: Lou standing in solidarity with me as I bake in the kitchen. Or more likely, in the hope that I will drop something delicious on the floor.

My Messy British Baking Experiment

Wait, but didn't you say you're an amateur baker?

Aren't these challenges made for the best bakers in Britain?

Yes, and yes, which is why I doubted I would be able to do this at all. But instead of letting my past baking failures get the best of me, I put on my **writing research identity** hat to help me figure out what skills and knowledge I already had about my own baking and *TGBBS*, and what

stuff I still needed to figure out to make my experiment work (ISU Writing Program).

I searched online for lists of the challenges bakers had to complete each season. I decided to pick a bake from an early collection since it has been a long time since I have seen any of those episodes, and I doubted I would remember how the judging portion of the contest went (yay for being forgetful!).

I also wanted to pick an episode that was earlier in the collection because the technical bakes tended to get harder as the show progressed. I knew I *probably* couldn't become a semiprofessional baker overnight, so I eliminated the bakes I knew I didn't have the skill level for. I also avoided super obscure recipes that I wouldn't have any previous experience with because it would be difficult to experiment with how I used my antecedent knowledge if I didn't have any knowledge about a bake in general.

After looking through the episode titles and doing some online research, I finally landed on a technical bake from way, way back—season 1, episode 1 on Netflix (“Cake”). The recipe? Mary Berry's own cherry cake.

cue dramatic music

I chose a cake recipe because I had some prior skill with making cakes for people's birthdays, so I had a knowledge base built up about cake making (when going up against the best amateur bakers in Britain, you have to give yourself all the advantages you can). For my experiment, I also decided I wanted to make my technical bake as authentic to the show as possible. So, this is the information I gave myself for my cake-making adventure, which is the same information the bakers in the episode got:

1. Ingredient list
2. Extremely basic instructions
3. Bakers' comments from the episode

Although I didn't watch the judging portion of the show until after my bake because I didn't want any hints from the experts, I did rewatch the portion of the show where the bakers made this recipe in the tent. I did this research because in the first episodes of the seasons, the bakers will sneak glances and listen to what other bakers say to decide what to do in the challenge and sometimes help with (or copy) what a baker next to them is doing. For my experiment to be as authentic to the tent as possible, I needed to be able to “collaborate” with my fellow bakers. So, I wrote down the bakers' comments

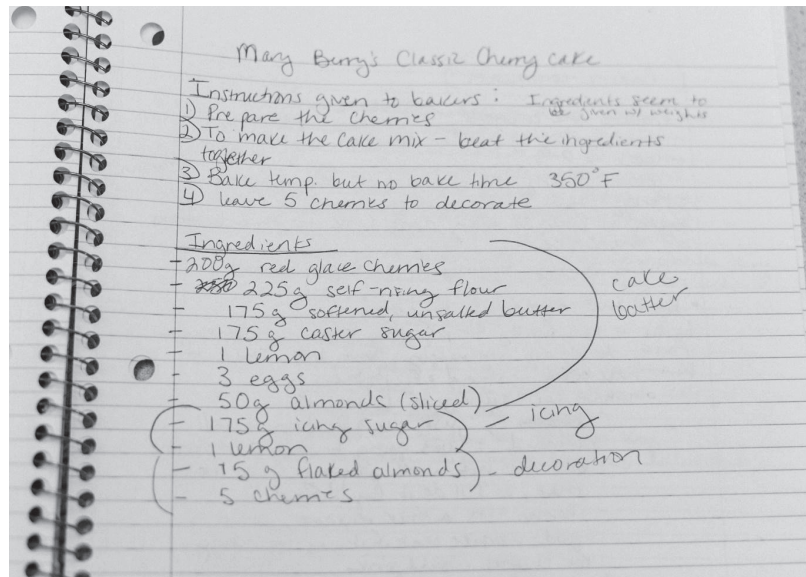


Figure 4: My notes on Mary Berry's cherry cake.

as they worked through the challenge, and I referred to the comments as I worked on my bake.

After I took notes on my ingredients, instructions, and comments the bakers made (Figure 4), I was ready to bake! Well, not really. I also had to go to the store to get all the ingredients, Google some weird British ingredient names (what's a glace cherry??), and go to two different stores to buy a Bundt pan. But after all that, THEN I was ready to bake!

In the rest of this article, I'll go over:

1. How I baked and, more importantly, *why* I made certain decisions
2. The final product and judging
3. How baking stuff connects to school words like *antecedent knowledge*

Ready, Set . . . BAKE!

I started by turning on my oven to 350°F because I knew that I was short on time, and I have a bad habit of forgetting to turn my oven on before I start mixing my ingredients (and consequently leaving myself alone with a pan full of brownie batter, which is never a good thing).

The first instruction on the list was “prep the cherries.” Yep. That’s it. So, since I have no prior experience making cherry anything, I decided to look at my notes about the comments other bakers made in the tent during the “cherry prepping” part of the episode.

I noticed that most bakers washed the cherries, a few bakers cut them in half or quarters, and others left them whole. One particular baker named Nancy said that she was going to dip hers in flour to ensure the cherries didn’t sink. No matter what the bakers decided to do, they were all actively taking up the new idea (prepping the cherries) based on their antecedent knowledge about baking with fruit. And based on their uptake of this instruction, many bakers seemed worried about the cherries sinking. I figured that may be one of the issues that Paul and Mary would be looking for here.



Figure 5: My cherry prepping literacies in action.

The cherries I bought did not look as large and nice and plump as the cherries that I saw in the show (dumb US cherries), so I decided I would rinse them and cut them in half (Figure 5). I was originally going to cut them in quarters to prevent them from sinking, but if I had tried, they would have turned to total mush (ick). I tried adding some flour to the mushy cherries to prevent them from sinking, but they mostly just absorbed into the general blob and didn’t seem to coat them much (double ick).

Cake Batter and Dread of Overmixing

After the (double ick) cherries were “prepared” as well as I knew how, I set them aside and started on the batter. In this portion of the recipe, it simply said, “Mix the ingredients for the batter.”

With little to nothing in terms of instructions to go on, my antecedent knowledge about cake baking kicked into gear. I decided to mix what I considered the “wet” ingredients (butter, sugar, and eggs) separately from the dry ingredients (flour). I was taking up this recipe direction solely on what I knew about cake baking—that usually dry ingredients were separate from the wet. Then you would pour the dry ingredients into the wet and mix them in slowly to avoid lumps.

I also decided to sift my flour and sugar with a big metal sifty-cup thing. I did this to avoid clumps of flour and sugar. I knew that this cherry cake was a sponge cake, which if I remembered correctly, was a lighter kind of cake. The only other cake I had made that was similar was that Italian cr me cake, and I thought the recipe told me to sift my ingredients then (or maybe that was scones??). Taking up our antecedent knowledge can be uncertain and messy, ya'll.

I decided to start in the mixer with my slightly microwaved butter and sifted sugar (which I sifted with my fancy sifter thingy). I mixed this on a medium speed until the butter and sugar were evenly mixed.



Figure 6: Zesting the lemon.

Then I added my eggs to the mix. A funny note about the eggs, I set them out to get to room temperature before I started my recipe because every cake I baked in the past (and many other recipes) recommend that eggs be at room temperature for **reasons** that I really don't understand, so I did it anyway just to be safe. So, I added *another* step to this recipe based on my past experiences. I zested my lemon into the batter and saved the rest of the lemon for my icing (Figure 6).

This whole time, I was super worried about overmixing the batter because whenever I bake anything, I feel like I see stuff in giant red all-caps letters on the recipe saying: **DO NOT OVERMIX THE BATTER!** Because I was scared about bombing this cake, I mixed the eggs into the



Figure 7: EXTREMELY CAREFUL folding.

other wet ingredients until they were *just* incorporated. I also added a splash of vanilla to the batter even though it wasn't on the ingredient list—because what kind of cake doesn't have vanilla in it?? It seemed so odd!

After the wet ingredients were finished, I folded the sifted flour into it *extremely carefully* because I knew that the whole success of the cake could hinge on how I mixed the stupid thing (Figure 7).

Then I realized that I forgot there were supposed to be almonds crushed up in the batter too (oops), so I toasted them because for the German chocolate cake and the Italian cr me cake, I had to roast all the nuts in a pan. I also remembered in *TGBBS* Paul would criticize folks for not toasting nuts in their recipes, so I used my antecedent knowledge about the show to make sure I had the best bake possible. I also remembered from my past nut-toasting experiences that it was crazy easy to burn them. And I'm a broke college student, so I didn't want to buy new almonds.

I turned the pan of almonds on a lower heat and waited for the almonds to smell nice and yummy, but it took too long, and I'm an impatient person and this is a *timed* bake. I cranked the heat up until I thought the almonds were smelly enough but not on fire, and I called it good (Figure 8). I dumped them into the cake batter with the weirdly smashed cherries, poured it into the greased Bundt pan, and popped it in the oven (Figure 9).

Even though I was given a temperature for the oven, I wasn't given instructions for how long I should bake it. I knew timing would be crucial for my oven time. I could see Paul Hollywood shaking his head in front of me, clucking at all my many mistakes. I had heard him say it too many times before. "Sponge is tricky. Too short in the oven and it's raw, too long and it's burnt." And then, of course, I'd burst into tears. But at least I could cry in the privacy of my own kitchen and *not* on national television.

The Classic Praying-to-the-Oven Part of the Challenge

In this part of the challenge, many bakers tend to look at their competitors to figure out when they should pull their cake out of the oven. So, I used this as an excuse to consult my notes regarding how long the other bakers in the tent decided to bake their cakes.



Figure 8: Toasting the almonds (sort of).



Figure 9: The batter goes in the pan and then into the oven.

While working in the tent on the show, bakers guessed anything between thirty and forty-five minutes for the bake time on this cherry cake, so I decided to stick with the more conservative thirty-minute time limit because I was terrified of burning the thing. I set my timer and walked away.

Aaanndd then promptly remembered I forgot I had to make the glaze. I ran back to the kitchen, squeezed lemon juice into powdered sugar, and mixed it with a whisk. When I read it was supposed to be a glaze, I thought a glaze was like frosting, but a lot runnier. I added some extra lemon juice to make the glaze a little runnier. Again, I saw myself using my antecedent knowledge about what a “glaze” versus a “frosting” was to get the consistency of the stuff right.

At thirty minutes, my timer went off and I did what all good bakers do during the technical challenge—I sat in front of the oven on my knees in a watching-my-cake-and-praying stance. I poked the top of it and the cake still seemed too squishy and wet, so I nervously waited five more minutes. Each second felt like an eternity as I watched the cake turn a light golden brown.

After those five minutes, I noticed that although the cake looked fine on the top, the edges were starting to look VERY brown. Thus, I freaked out and pulled it out of the oven like a maniac, with Paul Hollywood’s words haunting my mind.

And then I realized I had no plan for how to get it out of the dumb pan.

And I had no countertop space that wasn’t splattered in sugar and flour.

After fumbling through my disorganized pan cabinet, I finally dragged out a cooling rack. I placed it on top of the Bundt pan and clumsily flipped my cake out onto the table.

As I flipped it out, I noticed that the part of the cake that was in the pan (which was the top of the cake when it was flipped) was a LOT browner than the part I was seeing from the oven.

Well, oops. Just like in any technical bake, you gotta work with what you’ve got. Which in my case was a maybe burnt sponge?

The . . . Decorating? I Think?

Then it was time to play the waiting game. I knew from melting the icing on many birthday cupcakes in the past that if I put the icing on the cake while it was hot, it would run everywhere and probably ruin the whole thing.

But I was also running out of time (and patience), and I still needed time to glaze and decorate the cake.

I waited until I felt like the cake was just cool enough and broke out the icing. This is the moment I was worried would break me. When I've baked cakes before, I have gotten so deeply frustrated by piping that I would drive myself crazy trying to perfect it.

I knew I didn't have the time to be a perfectionist about the glaze, so I slopped it on top and let it run all over the cake. After everything was super sugary and sticky, I tried to make the leftover cherries and almonds I placed on top look *decorative*—whatever that means (Figure 11).

Overall, I thought the cake didn't look too bad. But the more important question was: How would it taste?

My husband and I grabbed a thick slice of cherry cake and sat on the couch, ready for the judging portion of the show (with all the pets waiting and hoping for a bite, of course). After watching the episode, we decided that Mary and Paul were concerned about a few specific different aspects of the cherry cakes:

- The sponge should be lightly colored and completely cooked.
- The cherries should be evenly dispersed throughout the cake.
- The glaze should be a good thickness for the top of the cake (bonus points if you piped it prettily).
- The top of the cake should be decorated neatly with cherries and almonds.

The Judging (Via a 2010 TV Version of Paul Hollywood and Mary Berry)

How did my cake compare to the competition? Well, the cake was definitely darker in color than the ones on the show, and my sponge was a little dry. I



Figure 10: Ready for decorating.



Figure 11: The balance between “do it quick” and (trying to) “make it pretty.”



Figure 12: Paul and Mary judge the cake (in absentia).



Figure 13: The product of my antecedent knowledge experiment.



Figure 14: The product enjoyed.

think I probably should have watched the oven a little closer than I did because the cake ended up overbaked. However, my glaze and my decorations seemed pretty standard compared to other cakes, and some bakers' glazes were far too runny. My glaze was thin enough to drip down the cake, but not so thin that it all washed off the sponge.

With my drier sponge, my husband and I determined I would have gotten second-to-last place, one place above the guy who forgot to put his cherries on top of his cake (to Mary's extreme horror). Poor Jordan. He just didn't read the directions the whole way through. I've learned that when you're baking new stuff, it's always a good idea to read through the whole recipe beforehand (based on my antecedent knowledge of my own past cooking and baking failures!).

What Did I Learn About Antecedent Knowledge?

So, what did I learn? First of all, I learned that we can take up our antecedent knowledge in a way that can help "fill in the gaps" of our knowledge about new learning situations. There were times in my experiment when my antecedent knowledge definitely came in handy, like how I knew that a glaze should be a different consistency from a

frosting because of my past icing experiences (see my Italian cr me cake earlier in this article where I used "frosting"). We all take up new learning situations in different ways, and I used my antecedent knowledge a lot when

I encountered this new recipe—especially to fill in the gaps of my own skills and knowledge.

But after I looked back at the full recipe of Mary Berry’s cherry cake, I thought it was crazy how my antecedent knowledge about cake baking made *more* work for me in a lot of ways. For example, in Mary’s full recipe she just had you mix all the cake ingredients together. No separating the wet and dry ingredients, no meticulous folding of the batter, no eggs at room temperature. In the end, I added *multiple steps* to the whole process. I made things a lot harder for myself by adding all these extra steps that I didn’t even need—all based on my uptake of my antecedent knowledge about cake baking.

Or sometimes I avoided certain actions (like piping the glaze onto the cake) based on my antecedent knowledge about my past frosting experiences. By using my antecedent knowledge here, I constantly played it safe because I was afraid to try anything new—especially in such a high-stakes situation. But had I been in the real competition, I would have gotten extra points from Paul and Mary for showing an extra skill with some fancy piping. However, based on my past experiences, I didn’t even attempt it. This reminded me that although some antecedent knowledge can be helpful when we’re taking up new learning situations, some antecedent knowledge is like that heavy stuff we shouldn’t have packed in our suitcase in the first place—it can weigh us down and stop us from doing super cool stuff, like taking risks and trying new ways to do a thing.

My baking adventures reminded me a lot of the experiences I had in the classroom with antecedent knowledge, too. When we go into our college classes for the first time, we don’t really know what to expect. We use our antecedent knowledge when considering what we know about student-ing, teachers, and assignments to help us navigate our new space. Sometimes our antecedent knowledge can help us do something new because of our past experiences, but sometimes it holds us back, makes more work for us, and stops us from trying new things because we don’t think we’ll be any good at it. But I think the most important thing is that if we’re aware of how our antecedent knowledge is informing our decision-making, we will be able to learn better and more confidently in the future.

And, you may be wondering, “What does all this have to do with my literate self and my writing? This is a writing journal, after all.” Yes, I was getting to that, I promise! In our writing classes and beyond, sometimes we will be asked to make something with confusing instructions, or write something we procrastinated on and now are pulling an all-nighter to finish—all sorts of wacky writing scenarios. Sometimes we will be asked to

write in genres we're super familiar with, and sometimes we will be asked to make something completely new and have no idea where to start.

What I've learned through this baking adventure is that when we're writing anything, we're approaching that new situation with a jumble of antecedent knowledge (that could be helping or hurting us) and strategies to take up all that new information. But the best part is, unlike the technical challenge in the baking show, you aren't alone in the chaos! You have a whole community of writers around you that are having all sorts of struggles and triumphs in their own writing. You can reach out to others for writing strategies, help with revision, and genre samples to help you along the way. In this crazy, sometimes pretty technical and confusing writing process, you aren't alone. And that's something to eat cake over.

Works Cited

"Cake." *The Great British Baking Show*, season 1, episode 1, Love Productions, 17 Aug. 2010. Netflix. www.netflix.com/title/80063224.

ISU Writing Program. "Key Terms and Concepts." *Grassroots Writing Research*, Illinois State University, isuwriting.com/key-terms.

Ashton Myerscough is a second year Master's student in Rhetoric and Composition and also a photographer! In her free time, she loves baking technical recipes (right now, apricot tarts!), taking her little dogs on long runs, and reading in a book-club-of-two with her Dad.



Notes



MARY BARRY'S CLASSIC CHERRY CAKE

* first preheat the oven to 350° degrees

1. Prepare the cherries
2. To make the cake mix beat ingredients together
3. Bake temperature 350°
4. Leave five cherries to decorate

in half or quarters?
quarters tend to get mushy!
best to cut them in half

Don't over mix the batter

The butter tend to bubble between 30-45 minutes

Be careful!
To short and it's raw, to long and it is **BURN!**

- 200g red glace cherries
- 225g self-rising flour [dry]
- 175g softened, unsalted butter [wet]
- 175g caster sugar [dry]
- 1 lemon [wet]
- 3 eggs [wet]
- 50g almonds (sliced) [dry]
- 175g icing sugar

people tend to heat eggs in room temp.

dry fruit for it to cool before decorating

Paul notes when the almonds aren't toasted

They probably want a glaze (mushier frosting)

be careful. more brown crust!
* Don't forget to preheat the oven! *