Trace the Thanksgiving Plate

Teacher plan · One class period · Grades 6-12 · No prep beyond copies

Every student in your room eats, which means every student already has a connection to agriculture. This lesson starts with the food they know best and follows it back to the farm, the state, and the people who do the work.

Students will

- Trace holiday foods back to the raw agricultural product.
- Read production data and use it to answer questions about where food is grown.
- Name at least three careers that bring one food to the table.

You need

One copy of the two student pages per student, pencils, and a board. A U.S. map is nice to have, but you can teach it without one.

Run of show (50 minutes)

Time	What happens
5 min Hook	Ask, "Do you eat food?" Then ask students to call out what goes on the table at their house for a big holiday meal. Write it on the board. Every family's plate counts, so welcome all of it, whether or not your family celebrates Thanksgiving.
10 min Part 1	Students list five foods and trace each one back to what came off the farm. Pumpkin pie becomes pumpkins, wheat, eggs, and milk.
15 min Part 2	Partners read the data table and answer the questions. Go over question 4 together. It is the one that gets the best conversation.
15 min Part 3	Each student picks one food and follows it from farm to table, using the career bank. Have a few students share one job they had never thought about.
5 min Exit	Students complete the exit ticket and hand it in.

Make it your own

- **Middle school:** do questions 1 through 3 together, and let partners share one chain.
- **Short on time:** skip Part 1 and start with the data.
- **Extension:** color the states on a map, or find out what your own county grows and add it to the board.

PRO TIP: INVITE A LOCAL VOICE.
Save the exit tickets. The job students are most curious about tells you who to ask in as your next guest speaker.

Trace the Thanksgiving Plate

Student page 1

Name: _____ Period: _____

Part 1: Your plate

List five foods from a big holiday meal at your house. What came off the farm to make each one?

Food on the table	What came off the farm?

Part 2: Read the data

The table shows the top states for each food and about how much of the U.S. crop or flock each one produces.

Food	#1 state	#2 state	#3 state
Turkey	Minnesota 17%	North Carolina 13%	Arkansas 12%
Potatoes	Idaho, about 33%	Washington 23%	Wisconsin 7%
Sweet potatoes	North Carolina 60%	California 25%	Mississippi 15%
Green beans	Wisconsin 46%	Florida 13%	New York 12%
Cranberries	Wisconsin 60%	Massachusetts 26%	New Jersey 8%
Pumpkins	Illinois 40%	Indiana 10%	California 9%
Green peas	Washington 36%	Minnesota 33%	Wisconsin 25%

Source: American Farm Bureau Federation, "Thanksgiving Dinner: A Celebration of American Agriculture," November 2024.

1. Which two foods get the largest share from one state? What share?

2. What percent of U.S. turkey comes from the top three states? Show your math.

3. Which state appears the most times in this table? How many times?

4. Add up the top three states for green peas, then compare that to turkey. If a drought hit the top pea states, what might happen to shoppers, farmers, and food companies?

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Student page 2

5. Pick one food from the table. Which top state is closest to you, and how do you think the food gets to your town?

Part 3: Follow one food from farm to table

Choose one food. Use the career bank, or add your own, to name who does the work at each stop.

My food: _____

Stop	Who does this job?	What do they do?
Plan and grow it		
Keep it healthy		
Keep the equipment running		
Make it safe to eat		
Move it and sell it		

CAREER BANK

Farmer or rancher · Poultry grower · Agronomist · Crop consultant · Irrigation technician · Veterinarian · Animal nutritionist · Pest management technician · Ag equipment technician · Food scientist · Food safety inspector · Truck driver · Logistics planner · Grocery buyer

Exit ticket

One job from today I never thought about:

One thing I would ask someone who does that job:

Finish this sentence: Agriculture connects to my life because…

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Answer key

Part 1

Answers vary. Look for raw products, not store products. Stuffing traces to wheat, celery, and onions. Mac and cheese traces to wheat and milk. Tamales trace to corn and pork.

Part 2

1. Sweet potatoes (North Carolina) and cranberries (Wisconsin), at 60% each.

2. 17 + 13 + 12 = **42%**

3. Wisconsin, **4 times** (potatoes, green beans, cranberries, green peas).

4. Green peas: 36 + 33 + 25 = **94%**, compared to 42% for turkey. Answers vary. Strong answers notice that bad weather in a few states could mean less supply, higher prices, and lost farm income. Turkey is spread across more states, so one bad season in one place has a smaller effect on the national supply.

5. Answers vary. Accept any reasonable top state and route, such as truck, rail, cold storage, or a distribution center.

Part 3: Sample answer for turkey

Stop	Sample job	What they do
Plan and grow it	Poultry grower	Raises the flock and manages the barn
Keep it healthy	Veterinarian, animal nutritionist	Protects flock health and balances the feed
Keep the equipment running	Ag equipment technician	Repairs and maintains feed and barn systems
Make it safe to eat	Food safety inspector, food scientist	Checks processing and tests food quality and safety
Move it and sell it	Logistics planner, truck driver, grocery buyer	Gets it to stores cold and on time

Keep going

For more career exploration, *The Replacement Crisis Workbook* has the Pathfinder career survey and all ten AFNR pathways.

Quick scoring (10 points)

Part 1 complete: 2 · Questions 1-5: 5 · Farm-to-table chain with at least three careers: 2 · Exit ticket: 1

PRO TIP: USE THE DATA AS A STARTING POINT.

These numbers shift from year to year. Have students compare them to the newest USDA reports for a quick lesson in checking a source.