NO PREP

Planning a Week of Meals

Includes: Student reading, case study, differentiated questions, teacher key

Name: Period: Date:

Planning a Week of Meals

The Decision You Make at Five Thirty Is Already Lost

Most poor eating decisions are not made at the table. They are made at five thirty in the afternoon by someone who is hungry, tired, has not decided anything, and is standing in front of a refrigerator holding ingredients that do not combine into a meal. At that moment the fastest option almost always wins, and the fastest option is rarely the one anyone would have chosen an hour earlier with a clear head. Meal planning is not really about nutrition or thrift, although it improves both. It is about moving the decision to a time when a person is capable of making it well. Deciding on Sunday what Wednesday looks like costs nothing on Wednesday, and it is the reason a plan beats willpower reliably. The financial argument is just as direct.

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Shop Your Kitchen Before You Shop the Store

Planning starts at home, not at the store, and skipping this step is the most common reason a well-intentioned plan produces a third jar of cumin and no dinner. Take inventory first. Look at what is in the refrigerator, the freezer, and the pantry, and pay particular attention to whatever is about to turn, because those items should anchor the first two or three meals of the week rather than being discovered later in a state nobody wants to touch. Building around what already exists cuts the grocery bill before a single item goes into a cart. The second step is to plan against the actual calendar rather than an imaginary one. A week is not seven identical

evenings. If Tuesday has practice until seven and Thursday has a shift, those nights get a fifteen-minute meal, a planned leftover, or something that finished cooking on Sunday. Assigning an ambitious recipe to the busiest night of the week is how plans collapse, and it collapses in a predictable way that a person can simply route around in advance. It also helps to accept that seven planned dinners is more ambition than most households need. Four or five planned meals plus one leftover night and one deliberately flexible night is a more durable structure, because it has slack built in. A plan with no slack breaks the first time something ordinary goes wrong, and something ordinary goes wrong most weeks.

Cook Once, Eat Twice, and Let Ingredients Overlap

The most efficient meal plans are built so that ingredients and effort carry across multiple meals rather than each dinner starting from zero. Overlapping ingredients is the first technique. Buying one bunch of cilantro for one recipe wastes most of the bunch, while planning two or three dishes that use it means the whole bunch gets used and the cost per meal drops. The same logic applies to a rotisserie chicken, a large bag of rice, a head of cabbage, or a container of yogurt. Cooking once and eating twice is the second. Doubling a batch of chili, rice, roasted vegetables, or ground turkey costs almost no additional time, since the pan is already hot and the cutting board is already dirty, and it converts one cooking session into two or three meals. Planned leftovers are different from accidental leftovers in an important way. A planned leftover is assigned to a specific night, so it gets eaten. An accidental leftover sits in a container until nobody is willing to open it. Component cooking extends the idea further. Preparing building blocks rather than finished dishes, meaning a pot of grain, a roasted tray of vegetables, a cooked protein, and one good sauce, allows a week of genuinely different meals from the same containers, since the same components become a grain bowl, a wrap, a salad, and a soup depending on assembly. Theme nights reduce decisions further, because Monday being pasta night makes the question smaller and easier.

The List, the Store, and the Price That Actually Matters

A grocery list organized by store section rather than by recipe is faster to shop and produces fewer forgotten items and fewer backtracking laps, which matters because time in the store correlates with unplanned purchases. Writing produce, dairy, meat, frozen, and pantry as separate groupings takes an extra minute at home and saves

considerably more than that in the aisle. Shopping the perimeter first is common advice and roughly reflects how most stores are laid out, with produce, dairy, and meat around the edges and packaged goods in the center, though it is a rough guide and not a rule, since frozen vegetables and dried beans are excellent center-aisle foods. The single most useful skill in the store is reading the unit price, meaning the small number on the shelf tag showing cost per ounce, per pound, or per item. It is the only way to compare two packages of different sizes honestly, and it regularly contradicts intuition, since the larger package is usually but not always cheaper per unit, and a sale on a smaller size can beat it. Buying the largest size is only a savings if the food gets eaten before it spoils, which is where bulk purchases quietly turn into waste. Frozen and canned foods deserve a defense here. Frozen vegetables are picked and frozen at peak ripeness, are nutritionally comparable to fresh and often superior to fresh produce that has traveled for a week, cost less, and do not spoil on a schedule. Canned beans, tomatoes, and fish are the same story, with sodium worth watching and rinsing worth doing.

Storage, Safety, and the Last Mile

A plan only pays off if the food survives to the day it was assigned to, which makes storage part of planning rather than an afterthought. Cooked food should reach the refrigerator within two hours of cooking, and within one hour if the room is above ninety degrees, because the range between forty and one hundred forty degrees Fahrenheit is where bacteria multiply fastest. Dividing a large batch into shallow containers cools it far faster than leaving it in the pot, which matters more than most people realize, since a deep container can sit in the danger zone for hours in a cold refrigerator. Most cooked leftovers keep three to four days refrigerated, and anything intended for later than that belongs in the freezer, labeled with contents and date, because unlabeled frozen containers become archaeology within a month. Reheat leftovers to 165 degrees Fahrenheit, and reheat only the portion being eaten rather than the whole container, since repeated heating and cooling both degrades quality and cycles the food through the danger zone again. A few produce habits protect the plan directly. Leafy greens last dramatically longer washed, dried thoroughly, and stored with a dry towel in the container. Herbs keep for weeks stored upright in a jar with water like flowers. Potatoes, onions, and garlic keep in a cool dark place and not in the refrigerator, and potatoes and onions stored together

spoil faster than either stored alone. Bananas ripen everything near them, which is useful deliberately and destructive accidentally.

Key Information: Planning and Shopping for a Week

Detail	Information
Start Where	Inventory the kitchen first; anchor early meals to what will spoil
Plan Against	The real calendar; fast meals on the busiest nights
Realistic Target	4-5 planned meals plus a leftover night and a flexible night
Planned Leftover	Assigned to a specific night, so it actually gets eaten
Unit Price	Cost per ounce or pound; the only honest size comparison
Frozen Produce	Frozen at peak ripeness; comparable to fresh and cheaper
Refrigerate Within	2 hours of cooking, or 1 hour above 90 degrees F
Leftovers	Keep 3-4 days refrigerated; reheat to 165 degrees F

Case Study: Devon's First Month on His Own

Devon moved into his first apartment in September and spent 340 dollars on groceries the first month while still eating fast food four nights a week. In October his FACS teacher had the class track where the money actually went. Devon found nineteen dollars of produce he had thrown away, including two bags of spinach he bought because spinach seemed like something an adult should own. "I bought it for nothing," he said. "There was never a meal it was for." He rebuilt the month around four planned dinners a week. Sunday he cooked a double batch of chili and a tray of roasted vegetables, and Wednesday's dinner was assigned as leftovers before the week started. He wrote his list by store section and started reading the unit price tags, which showed him the larger rice bag cost less than half per pound. November came in at 214 dollars with one fast food night. "The food didn't get cheaper," he said. "I just stopped buying things that were never going to become dinner."

1. Devon said he bought spinach for nothing. Explain what was missing, using what the reading says about plans and waste.

2. Devon assigned Wednesday as leftovers before the week began. Explain why that works better than simply having leftovers.

Multiple Choice

1. According to the reading, the first step in planning a week of meals is to:

    a) Write the grocery list organized by store section

    b) Take inventory of the refrigerator, freezer, and pantry

    c) Choose seven recipes the household has not tried before

    d) Compare unit prices for the items most often purchased

2. The unit price on a shelf tag is useful because it allows a shopper to:

    a) Compare packages of different sizes on the same basis

    b) Identify which items the store expects to sell out first

    c) See how much sodium each serving of the product contains

    d) Determine whether a product is nutritionally complete

3. Why should a large batch of hot chili be divided into shallow containers?

    a) Smaller amounts can be reheated to a higher temperature

    b) Shallow containers stack more efficiently in a refrigerator

    c) Dividing it prevents the flavors from becoming too strong

    d) It cools faster, spending less time in the danger zone

Matching

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line next to each term.

Term	Definition
1. ___ Planned Leftover	A) The shelf figure showing cost per ounce or per pound
2. ___ Component Cooking	B) Choosing recipes that share items so nothing is bought for one use
3. ___ Unit Price	C) Preparing building blocks that assemble into different dishes
4. ___ Danger Zone	D) A second meal already assigned to a night before the week starts
5. ___ Overlapping Ingredients	E) The 40 to 140 degree range where bacteria multiply fastest

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. Cooked food should be refrigerated within _____ hours.

2. Refrigerated leftovers generally keep three to _____ days.

3. Reheat leftovers to _____ degrees Fahrenheit.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. Explain why the reading says a plan beats willpower at the end of a long day.

_____

_____

_____

2. Explain why a plan with four dinners can work better than one with seven.

3. Explain why buying the largest package is not automatically the cheaper choice.