

Name: _____

Class: _____

What's wrong with our food system

By Birke Baehr

2010

Organic foods are foods that are grown naturally, without using pesticides or other added chemicals. In this speech, an 11-year-old named Birke Baehr shares his thoughts about the way most people get their food. Note: This speech uses an offensive term for someone who has a mental illness. As you read, take notes on the changes that Birke wants people to make.

[1] Hello. My name is Birke Baehr, and I'm 11 years old. I came here today to talk about what's wrong with our food system. First of all, I would like to say that I'm really amazed at how easily kids are led to believe all the marketing and advertising¹ on TV, at public schools and pretty much everywhere else you look. It seems to me like corporations² are always trying to get kids, like me, to get their parents to buy stuff that really isn't good for us or the planet. Little kids, especially, are attracted by colorful packaging and plastic toys. I must admit, I used to be one of them. I also used to think that all of our food came from these happy, little farms where pigs rolled in mud and cows grazed on grass all day.



"Untitled" by Brad is licensed under CC0.

What I discovered was this is not true. I began to look into this stuff on the Internet, in books and in documentary films,³ in my travels with my family. I discovered the dark side of the industrialized⁴ food system. First, there's genetically engineered⁵ seeds and organisms.⁶ That is when a seed is manipulated⁷ in a laboratory to do something not intended by nature — like taking the DNA of a fish and putting it into the DNA of a tomato. Yuck. Don't get me wrong, I like fish and tomatoes, but this is just creepy. (Laughter) The seeds are then planted, then grown.

1. **Advertise (verb)** to make people aware of something for sale
2. businesses
3. informational movies
4. made by a business
5. when a scientist changes a living thing's genes, or the tiny bits of information that make up a living thing
6. an individual living thing, such as a plant, an animal, or a germ
7. to change

The food they produce has been proven to cause cancer and other problems in lab animals, and people have been eating food produced this way since the 1990s. And most folks don't even know they exist. Did you know rats that ate genetically engineered corn had developed signs of liver and kidney⁸ toxicity?⁹ These include kidney inflammation¹⁰ and lesions and increased kidney weight. Yet almost all the corn we eat has been altered genetically in some way. And let me tell you, corn is in everything. And don't even get me started on the Confined¹¹ Animal Feeding Operations called CAFOS.

Conventional¹² farmers use chemical fertilizers made from fossil fuels that they mix with the dirt to make plants grow. They do this because they've stripped the soil from all nutrients¹³ from growing the same crop over and over again. Next, more harmful chemicals are sprayed on fruits and vegetables, like pesticides and herbicides, to kill weeds and bugs. When it rains, these chemicals seep into the ground, or run off into our waterways, poisoning our water too. Then they irradiate¹⁴ our food, trying to make it last longer, so it can travel thousands of miles from where it's grown to the supermarkets.

So I ask myself, how can I change? How can I change these things? This is what I found out. I discovered that there's a movement for a better way. Now a while back, I wanted to be an NFL football player. I decided that I'd rather be an organic farmer instead. (Applause) Thank you. And that way I can have a greater impact¹⁵ on the world. This man, Joel Salatin, they call him a lunatic¹⁶ farmer because he grows against the system. Since I'm home-schooled, I went to go hear him speak one day. This man, this "lunatic farmer," doesn't use any pesticides, herbicides, or genetically modified seeds. And so for that, he's called crazy by the system.

[5] I want you to know that we can all make a difference by making different choices, by buying our food directly from local farmers, or our neighbors who we know in real life. Some people say organic or local food is more expensive, but is it really? With all these things I've been learning about the food system, it seems to me that we can either pay the farmer, or we can pay the hospital. (Applause) Now I know definitely which one I would choose. I want you to know that there are farms out there — like Bill Keener in Sequatchie Cove Farm in Tennessee — whose cows do eat grass and whose pigs do roll in the mud, just like I thought. Sometimes I go to Bill's farm and volunteer, so I can see up close and personal where the meat I eat comes from. I want you to know that I believe kids will eat fresh vegetables and good food if they know more about

-
8. organs in the body
 9. poison
 10. a small area of tissue that is hot, red, swollen, and sore because of infection or injury
 11. **Confine (verb)** to keep within limits
 12. done in the usual way
 13. something that plants, animals, and people need to live and grow
 14. to send waves of energy out by sources of heat or light
 15. a strong effect
 16. an offensive and dated word used to describe someone who has a mental illness

it and where it really comes from. I want you to know that there are farmers' markets in every community popping up. I want you to know that me, my brother and sister actually like eating baked kale chips. I try to share this everywhere I go.

Not too long ago, my uncle said that he offered my six-year-old cousin cereal. He asked him if he wanted organic Toasted O's or the sugarcoated flakes — you know, the one with the big striped cartoon character on the front. My little cousin told his dad that he would rather have the organic Toasted O's cereal because Birke said he shouldn't eat sparkly cereal. And that, my friends, is how we can make a difference one kid at a time.

So next time you're at the grocery store, think local, choose organic, know your farmer and know your food. Thank you.

"What's wrong with our food system" from TED by "Birke Baehr". Copyright © 2010 by TED. This text is licensed under CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

Unless otherwise noted, this content is licensed under the [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 license](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/)

Text-Dependent Questions

Directions: For the following questions, choose the best answer or respond in complete sentences.

1. What is the main idea of Birke's speech?
 - A. More people should become farmers.
 - B. It is important to eat many different kinds of food.
 - C. People have the power to improve the way food is grown.
 - D. If you want your food to be healthy you need to use chemicals.

2. How does Birke support his argument that there is something wrong with our food system?
 - A. He asks questions about why people do not like organic food and explains how to make it cheaper.
 - B. He gives examples of how our food system can hurt people and the environment.
 - C. He lists his favorite foods and explains why they are better than other foods.
 - D. He tells stories about what he wants to be when he grows up.

3. Which detail shows why Birke wants to be an organic farmer?
 - A. "Little kids, especially, are attracted by colorful packaging and plastic toys." (Paragraph 1)
 - B. "And let me tell you, corn is in everything." (Paragraph 2)
 - C. "This man...doesn't use any pesticides, herbicides, or genetically modified seeds." (Paragraph 4)
 - D. "Some people say organic or local food is more expensive, but is it really?" (Paragraph 5)

4. The word "local" in paragraph 5 most closely means —
 - A. from nearby.
 - B. hard to find.
 - C. very large.
 - D. expensive.

5. What changes does Birke want people to make to improve our food system?

Name _____

Word Study

Base Words and Endings

- The most basic form of a word is called the **base word**.
- An **ending** is the letter or letters added to the end of the base word. Adding an ending to a base word changes the base word's meaning or part of speech.

For example, add the ending *-tion* to the verb *promote* to form the noun *promotion*:

Base word: promote (verb) + **Ending:** *-tion* = promotion (noun)

You can also change some base words that are nouns into verbs by adding the ending *-er* or *-or*, as in the following example:

Base word: play (verb) + **Ending:** *-er* = player (noun)

My TURN Add an ending to the following base words to change them from verbs to nouns. Write the ending you used in the center column and the new word you created in the right column. Then decode, or read, each new word.

Base Word (verb):	Ending:	New Word (noun):
1. commit	_____	_____
2. cooperate	_____	_____
3. run	_____	_____
4. excite	_____	_____

My TURN Use texts that you have read recently to find two words that contain an ending. Write each word. Then remove the ending, and write the base word.

1. _____

2. _____

Name _____

Spelling

Spell Base Words with Endings

The most basic form of a word is called the **base word**. Adding an **ending** to a base word changes the base word's meaning or part of speech.

When you add an ending to a base word, you may have to change how the base word is spelled. For example, you may have to double the final consonant:

Base word: admit + **Ending:** -ing = admitting

Or, you may have to change the consonant *y* to *i*, as in this example:

Base word: defy + **Ending:** -es = defies

SPELLING WORDS

equipped
program
relies
permitting
benefit

conveying
theories
permit
involve
benefited

revise
rely
involvement
equip
theory

revising
industry
conveys
programming
industries

My TURN Complete the following sentences by combining and correctly spelling the base word and ending shown in parentheses.

1. The fundraiser (**benefit / -ed**) _____ the scholarship program.
2. Juan (**rely / -ies**) _____ on his mom to drive him to baseball practice.
3. Computer (**program / -ing**) _____ is a valuable skill.
4. The lab is (**equip / -ed**) _____ with state-of-the-art microscopes.