

Middle Level Grades 7 & 8

Informative Stimulus-Based Prompt

Organic Farming

Introduction

In just about every grocery store you enter today, there is an organic section in the produce department. Some people prefer to purchase organic fruits and vegetables, thinking they are healthier for their families. Organic fruits and vegetables frequently cost more than the produce that is not farmed organically. The two passages below present the new wave of making a living by organic farming including the difficulties farmers encounter, as well as the benefits that this kind of farming offers.

Prompt

Based on the two passages you read, what are the potential benefits and drawbacks involved in organic farming as a vocation? Be sure to use evidence from both passages to support your response

Passage One: ***On Tiny Plots, A New Generation of Farmers Emerges***

1.) Joseph Gabiou walks the fields of Wobbly Cart Farming Collective with a practiced eye. He kicks dirt into place to keep the wind from blowing the protective covering off a row of organic broccoli. The seedlings are vulnerable to the flea beetles that came in the spring, just as longtime farmers in this valley told him they would.

2.) To a new farmer, that's crucial information. The farm, started five years ago, is young. But so is the 33-year-old Gabiou at a time when the average age of the American farmer is 57,

Grades 7 & 8 Informative Stimulus-Based Prompt

according to the Department of Agriculture. The 2007 agriculture census found that more than one-quarter of all farmers are 65 or older.

3.) Wobbly Cart is also tiny, just 6 acres. Nationwide, the average farm is 449 acres. But Gabiou and business partner Asha McElfresh, 32, differ from typical farmers in another way. Wobbly Cart, say agriculture specialists, is part of a movement in which young people—most of whom come from cities and suburbs—are taking up what may be the world's oldest profession: organic farming.

4.) "I'm seeing an enthusiastic group of young people all across the country who want to get into farming," says Fred Kirschenmann, a longtime farmer and fellow at the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture at Iowa State University in Ames.

5.) The wave of young farmers on tiny farms is too new and too small to have turned up significantly in USDA statistics, but people in the farming world acknowledge there's something afoot.

6.) For these new farmers, going back to the land isn't a rejection of conventional society, but an embrace of growing crops and raising animals for market as an honorable, important career choice—one that's been waning since 1935, when the U.S. farms peaked at 6.8 million.

7.) It's about creating something real—the food people eat—and at the same time healing the Earth, says Severine von Tscharner Fleming, 27, a farmer in Nevis, N.Y. "The America that I want to live in will support people who are willing to work [very hard] who want to do good things for their community. We're patriots of place. Here I am, planting my trees."

8.) Three factors have made these small organic farms possible: a rising consumer demand for organic and local produce, a huge increase in farmers markets nationwide, and the growing popularity of community-supported-agriculture (CSA) programs.

9.) CSAs are programs that allow consumers to buy a share of a farm's output for one year. The farmer gets an assured income stream [money they can count on], and the consumer gets a box

Grades 7 & 8 Informative Stimulus-Based Prompt

of produce delivered once a week during the growing season. Shares generally range from \$25 to \$50 a week.

10.) The economics [of small organic farms] can be brutal. "Most first-generation young farmers work another job for a decade or more, and/or have a spouse who works full time," says [Cornell agriculture professor] Ian Merwin.

11.) Jennifer Belknap, 36, and her husband, Jim McGinn, 43, are old-timers. Their Rochester, Wash., farm, Rising River, dates to 1994. Belknap estimates they net \$30,000 a year. They live off the land and keep other expenses to a minimum.

12.) Because very few [of these young farmers] grew up on farms, most get the skills they need by interning, apprenticing or working on other farms.

13.) Belknap says Rising River Farm gets its share of "Idealistic barefooted gardeners" who don't get that farming is hard work. But they keep coming, and she's proud to say several new farmers began their career there.

14.) It's wonderful to do what you love, she says, but no one should imagine it's romantic and glamorous. "We used to pull bags for our vegetables from the recycling. One of the jobs for the interns was sniffing the bags to see if they were too smelly to use."

July 14, 2009 | By Jack L. Roberts

Source: <http://www.commondreams.org/headline/2009/07/14-4>

Passage Two: ***Life on an Organic Farm***

- 1) Jesse Williams' career as an organic farmer almost ended before it began. Rising with the sun, Jesse carefully collected his first harvest of organic lettuce and headed for the local farmer's market in Bellingham, Washington. His little produce stand had no umbrella, and as the hours dragged by, his precious greens shriveled in the summer sun. After a long, hot day, Jesse trudged home with only seven dollars in his pocket -- and crates of unsold wilted lettuce in his truck.
- 2) That was four years ago, when Jesse Williams was just 16. These days, he makes enough money growing organic vegetables to pay most of the bills on his small farm a few miles south of the Canadian border. The question for Jesse -- and for hundreds of young farmers all around the country -- is whether organic farming has enough of a future to support a family and a lifetime of living lightly off the land.
- 3) Jesse's grandfather was a lawyer, but Jesse's father, Dusty, turned tail at the thought of working in an office. "I was a child of the '60s," says Dusty Williams, "and tilling the soil was more consistent with my values."
- 4) As he and his wife raised young Jesse, they tried conventional farming, using chemical fertilizers and pesticides to grow peas for a cannery. But like most small farmers, Dusty Williams watched the cost of chemicals rise as the price paid for produce plummeted. Eventually, the pea cannery left town.

Making ends meet

- 5) In 1996, the elder Williams and his neighbor Pete Dykstra noticed how much the market for organic carrots in the Northwest was expanding.
- 6) Dusty and Dykstra forked over \$400 to have a state inspector certify that 3 acres of their pasture was free of synthetic chemicals. Using manure, compost and other natural fertilizers, and spending countless backbreaking hours pulling weeds, the two men turned a modest profit. In the years that followed, they made enough money to eventually add an acre of organic peas and 25 acres of organic sweet corn.

Grades 7 & 8 Informative Stimulus-Based Prompt

- 7) In the meantime, Jesse was building an organic greenhouse for tomatoes. He planted row upon row of organic squash, zucchini, parsley, basil, berries, lettuce, broccoli and onions. The day of our visit, his fields were sprinkled with the never-ending bane of organic farmers: weeds. But Jesse, who has never used herbicides, feels no longing for a quick chemical fix.
- 8) "If there are too many weeds it isn't because I didn't use pesticides. It's because I didn't do something right, didn't work hard enough," he told us.

From the field to the grocer

- 9) In fact, organic farmers talk a lot about the need to sell locally. According to the agricultural extension office of the University of Massachusetts, food in the United States travels an average of 1,300 miles from the farm to the market shelf. Not only does freshness suffer, but refrigerated trucks add the monetary and environmental costs of fossil fuels.
- 10) The new standards outlined in the National Organic Program¹ will affect each of our organic farmers differently. Jesse Williams is skeptical, because he expects that Washington state will be flooded with organic products from other regions. "It's definitely an industry with a huge future," Jesse says with a sigh. "But as it gets better, big companies are going to jump in." He expects those companies will lower production costs by specializing in high-profit crops like tomatoes, and will be pressured to pay farmworkers extremely low wages.
- 11) Jesse's father Dusty expects mixed results from the new standards. On the one hand, he figures organic carrots from California will pour in, making it tough to sell his own carrots at a profit. On the other hand, his organic sweet corn is popular in San Francisco, and is free of the corn pests and diseases that affect organic corn farmers in other parts of the country.
- 12) Jesse, still only 20 years old, hopes he'll be an organic farmer for many years to come. The long hours don't concern him yet, and the chance to reduce costs by innovating excites him. In an era where smart young adults like Jesse see some of their peers making piles of money in new

Grades 7 & 8 Informative Stimulus-Based Prompt

technology, we just had to know whether Jesse figured anyone could get rich by being an organic farmer.

13) "Yeah," he answers, "I think you can. Maybe not the easiest way to get rich, but I think it can be done." And if he doesn't become a millionaire, at least he'll eat well.

¹ the National Organic Program is the federal regulatory framework governing organic food.

By Jack Hamann

Source: <http://edition.cnn.com/FOOD/specials/2000/organic.farms/>

Grades 7 & 8 Informative Stimulus-Based Prompt

Prompt

Based on the two passages you read, what are the potential benefits and drawbacks involved in organic farming as a vocation? Be sure to use evidence from both passages to support your response.

Prewriting Suggestions

1. Consider the facts presented in both articles that farmers must deal with if they are going to choose organic farming as a living.
2. What facts do you think are most important in the decision the farmers must make?
3. Is organic farming something you might consider as a way to make a living?
4. Remember to organize your essay so that that it flows smoothly from one idea to the next.

Editing and Revising Suggestions

- Have you provided an introduction to the topic?
- Have you organized ideas and information in a clear and meaningful way?
- Have you developed the topic with specific and important details and examples?
- Do you use specific language and vocabulary to communicate and clarify the relationships among important ideas?
- Are your sentences clear and complete?
- Have you used transition words or phrases, when needed, that clearly show how your ideas are connected?
- Have you provided a concluding section or statement that follows from and supports the ideas and analysis presented?
- Take time to check that your spelling, capitalization, grammar, and punctuation are correct.