

Grapefruit Spoons (Opening Paragraph)  
By Kimberly Wetzel

*For the Food writing prompt in August 2019, Kimberly Wetzel wrote a very interesting piece about grapefruit. Here is the opening paragraph. It mentions neither grapefruit nor grapefruit spoons, but it does set the scene for the narrator's relationship to food when she was growing up.*

1) Growing up, I didn't think much about food other than that my mom's food tasted good. 2) I mostly knew it in those iffy moments of contrast at other people's tables: ramen noodles for breakfast or that horrifying chunk of turkey skin I found in my stuffing. 3) Other than the unfortunate season where my Dad, who never drank wine, traded free drycleaning for canned salmon from the local wine shop owner, our typical meals lacked exotic ingredients and complex preparations but they nourished us in the form of hearty comfort foods, lovingly prepared. 4) My mom would not call herself much of a cook. 5) She shied away from trying new recipes, but she excelled in the details. 6) Nothing was haphazard even down to the warmed plates and serving dishes she prepared for every meal.

Kimberly—

Eating is a highly sensory activity. All five senses are fully engaged—well, I guess hearing can possibly be less than fully engaged, but taste, smell, sight, and texture are always very engaged. I want to show you several ways in which you disengage the senses in this paragraph about eating and operate on the level of information and ideas rather than experience. I've numbered the six sentences in this paragraph, and I'll run through them one at a time.

**Sentence 1.**

Growing up, I didn't think much about food other than **that my mom's food tasted good.**

The clause I highlighted in yellow is a noun clause. A noun clause can serve pretty much any purpose a regular noun can serve (subject, direct object, object of a preposition, etc.). In this case, the noun clause is the object of the two-word preposition “other than.” This sentence is grammatically correct. But it takes a pretty straightforward idea—“I liked my mother’s cooking”—and converts it into an abstract noun, which is then tucked into a prepositional phrase. I think I would break this sentence in two:

Growing up, I never thought much about food. I knew my mother’s food tasted good.

## **Sentence 2.**

I mostly knew it in those iffy moments of contrast at other people’s tables: ramen noodles for breakfast or that horrifying chunk of turkey skin I found in my stuffing.

The fulcrum of this sentence is the abstract noun phrase, “those iffy moments of contrast.” “Ramen noodles for breakfast” and “that horrifying chunk of turkey skin” are appositives referring back to “iffy moments of contrast.” An appositive is a noun renaming a previous noun. By choosing to set this sentence up as a noun-appositive sentence, you have made it necessary to take two vivid scenes—little Kimberly eating ramen noodles for breakfast at somebody else’s house, and little Kimberly being horrified at the sight of turkey skin in the stuffing at somebody else’s house—and reduce them to nouns renaming an abstract noun. Again, there’s nothing ungrammatical about this sentence, and you haven’t left out any information. But the experience-to-information ratio is pretty low in this sentence. Consider rewriting along these lines (obviously I’m making up the details, but you get the idea):

I knew my mother’s food tasted good—mostly when I was faced with the iffy food eaten at other people’s houses. I was appalled after a sleepover when a friend offered me ramen for breakfast. At

my aunt's house one Thanksgiving, I recoiled at a piece of turkey skin I found in the dressing.

**Sentence 3.**

Other than the unfortunate season where my Dad, who never drank wine, traded free drycleaning for canned salmon from the local wine shop owner, our typical meals lacked exotic ingredients and complex preparations but they nourished us in the form of hearty comfort foods, lovingly prepared.

There's a whole lot going on in this sentence. Let's tease out the actions and relevant information:

- Your dad was a dry-cleaner.
- He worked out a swap with a wine shop owner.
- But your dad wasn't a wine-drinker, so instead of giving your father wine, the wine merchant gave him canned salmon.
- That was the only time you had exotic ingredients in your food at home.
- Nevertheless, your parents nourished you with comfort foods lovingly prepared.

All that information is there in your sentence. But I had to figure it out. This sentence engages the figuring-out part of my brain, not the experiencing part of my brain. Another issue in this sentence is this: the point you're making is that you had very un-exotic food except for the period of time when you were getting salmon. But by the time you get to the point, I'm a tad confused. I would flip-flop the sentence so that you make your point early, then settle into a (more straightforward) account of the dry-cleaning-salmon trade:

Our parents nourished us with hearty comfort foods, lovingly prepared but rarely complex. The ingredients were rarely exotic, except for a brief period when we ate our weight in canned salmon. My father, a dry-cleaner, worked out a trade with the owner of the local wine store. Only my father

didn't drink wine, so the wine merchant paid for his dry-cleaning with canned salmon.

**Sentences 4 and 5.** These look fine as they are. Don't underestimate the value of a short, straightforward sentence!

**Sentence 6.**

Nothing was haphazard, even down to the warmed plates and serving dishes she prepared for every meal.

This isn't bad, but it's worth noting that your mother, who has lovingly attended to every detail, disappears from the sentence because you have translated the action (a mother warming plates and serving dishes) into a couple of nouns (warmed plates and serving dishes). I recommend revising along these lines:

Nothing was haphazard. My mother even warmed the plates and serving dishes for every meal.

That all might seem picky or perhaps even overwhelming, but the overarching idea is that experience comes to us as "Who did what?" Subject-verb-object. English grammar gives us lots of ways to convey information in other ways—noun clauses used as objects of prepositions, abstract nouns, nominalized verbs, etc. Those structures allow us to cram more and more information into a sentence. But when you use those structures, your reader has to do the work of translating back into "Who did what?" I see "warmed plates and serving dishes," and my brain has to translate that into "Mother warmed the plates and serving dishes." I see "iffy moments of contrast at other people's tables: ramen noodles for breakfast," and my brain translates that into "Kimberly sat at somebody else's table and was served ramen noodles for breakfast. And she didn't like it." There are times when it is perfectly appropriate to ask your reader to do that extra work. But it's best to make it your habit, your default, to align subject and verbs with the action of the sentence.