

Thanksgiving Dinner Disasters

B2 First / C1 Advanced · Reading / Speaking
November worksheet CambridgeMB

1. Warm-up: Dinner Disasters

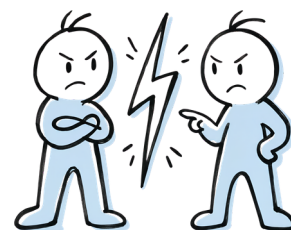
Discuss in pairs or small groups.

1. Have you ever been to a family meal that went badly wrong? What happened?



2. What is the worst thing that could happen at a big family dinner? Rank these from 1 (most disastrous) to 5 (least disastrous):

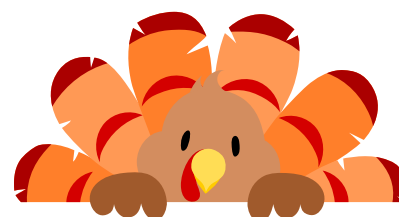
- The main dish is burnt.
- A guest announces they are vegetarian at the last minute.
- A pet eats the dessert.
- Two relatives start an argument about politics.
- Someone arrives three hours late.



3. Why do you think family meals produce so many funny stories afterwards?

2. Reading: The Year of the Flying Turkey

Read the text quickly and decide: who is the funniest character, and why? Then answer the questions below.



Every family has a Thanksgiving story that gets retold, with increasing embellishment, year after year. Ours is the story of the Year of the Flying Turkey.

My aunt Marcia had been planning the meal for weeks. She had ordered a free-range, twenty-pound bird from a farm two hours away, and she had been rehearsing her gravy recipe since September. By noon on the day itself the house smelled wonderful, which, in hindsight, should have made us suspicious, because nobody had ever known Marcia's oven to behave itself.

At around two o'clock, while she was arguing on the phone with my grandfather about whether anyone actually enjoyed sweet potatoes with marshmallows, the smoke alarm went off. Nobody reacted at first. It went off every year, so we assumed it was part of the ceremony. It was only when my cousin Danny, who had just announced that he was now a vegetarian, wandered into the kitchen that anyone noticed the flames. The turkey, which had been roasting at 350 degrees Celsius rather than Fahrenheit since breakfast, now looked like an oversized charcoal briquette.

What happened next is still disputed. Hardly had the alarm stopped ringing when my uncle Pete, who had been trying to help, seized the tray and hurled it out of the back door. It sailed across the patio and demolished the garden fence. Meanwhile, while everyone else was staring in horror at the empty oven, Biscuit, the family dog, who had been waiting under the table all afternoon for exactly this kind of opportunity, quietly finished the pumpkin pie.

We ordered pizza. By the time it arrived, we had been laughing for nearly an hour, and Danny, who had piled his plate high with every side dish, was the only person in the room who was entirely satisfied. We still cook turkey every year, but Marcia now sets two timers and keeps a fire extinguisher beside the gravy boat. Just in case.

Comprehension (Part 5 style)



Try to answer these questions in your own words:

1. Why does the writer say the pleasant smell "should have made us suspicious"?
2. Why did nobody react to the smoke alarm at first?
3. What is the writer's attitude towards the events of the day?
4. What is ironic about Danny at the end of the story?
5. What does the writer imply by saying that what happened next "is still disputed"?
6. What is the effect of the final two words, "Just in case"?

Compare your answers with a partner!

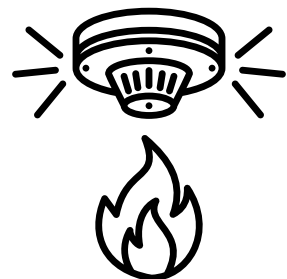
Choose the best answer: A, B, C or D.

1. Why does the writer say the pleasant smell "should have made us suspicious"?

- ☐ A. A successful meal was out of character for Marcia's oven.
- ☐ B. The smell was stronger than usual.
- ☐ C. Marcia had cooked something unusual.
- ☐ D. The family had been warned about the oven.

2. Why did nobody react to the smoke alarm at first?

- ☐ A. They were arguing too loudly to hear it.
- ☐ B. They were used to it going off.
- ☐ C. They assumed Marcia was dealing with it.
- ☐ D. They believed it was a joke by Danny.



3. What is the writer's attitude towards the events of the day?

- ☐ A. Embarrassed by the family's behaviour
- ☐ B. Critical of Marcia's carelessness
- ☐ C. Affectionately amused
- ☐ D. Irritated by the lack of organisation

4. What is ironic about Danny at the end of the story?

- ☐ A. He was the only one who enjoyed the pizza.
- ☐ B. His announcement caused the disaster.
- ☐ C. He had refused to help in the kitchen.
- ☐ D. The vegetarian was the least affected by the ruined meal.



5. What does the writer imply by saying that what happened next "is still disputed"?

- ☐ A. The writer is unsure whether Pete was to blame.
- ☐ B. Family members remember the events differently.
- ☐ C. Nobody has admitted responsibility for the fire.
- ☐ D. The writer was not present at the time.

6. What is the effect of the final three words, "Just in case"?

- ☐ A. They add a humorous touch.
- ☐ B. They imply that Marcia no longer trusts her relatives.
- ☐ C. They show that the family is seriously worried about safety.
- ☐ D. They suggest that the family has given up cooking at home

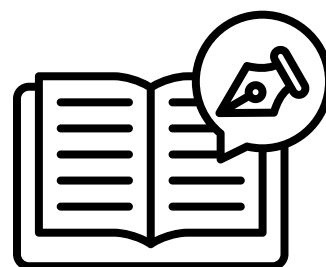


3. Language focus: narrative tenses

3a. Notice

Find an example in the text of each of the following. Then discuss why each tense is used in that context.

1. Past simple (a completed event)
2. Past continuous (an action in progress when something else happened)
3. Past perfect (an action before another past action)
4. Past perfect continuous (an activity that had been going on for some time before another event)
5. An example of inversion after a negative or near-negative adverbial



3b. Practice: The Frozen Turkey

Read the story, then put the verbs in brackets into the correct form. You will need past simple, past continuous, past perfect and past perfect continuous, plus one passive, one inversion and one present perfect.

When I (1) _____ (spend) a year in Ohio as an exchange student, my host family invited me to my first Thanksgiving. I (2) _____ (never / experience) anything like it, so I decided to impress everyone by bringing a Spanish tortilla the size of a car tyre.

By the time I arrived on Thursday morning, my host mother, Brenda, (3) _____ (already / cook) for hours. While she (4) _____ (peel) potatoes, my host father, Gary, was in the garage with a hairdryer,

trying to defrost the turkey. It turned out that nobody (5) _____ (take) it out of the freezer, and the bird (6) _____ (still / be) as hard as a rock.

At three o'clock, as Gary (7) _____ (point) the hairdryer at the turkey, the fuse blew and the whole house went dark. Hardly (8) _____ (we / light) the candles when Uncle Ray, who (9) _____ (sleep) in front of the football since lunchtime, woke up and asked when dinner was.

Brenda looked at my enormous tortilla, then at the frozen turkey, and announced that the tortilla (10) _____ (serve) as the main course. The turkey, meanwhile, (11) _____ (leave) to defrost in the bathtub, where it stayed until Friday.

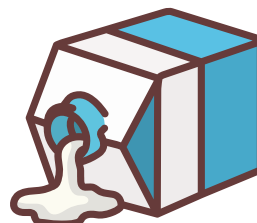
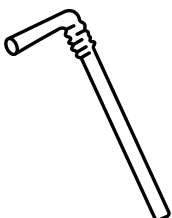
It was the best Thanksgiving I (12) _____ (ever / have), and ever since, the family (13) _____ (insist) on a tortilla every November.

4. Vocabulary: kitchen and disaster idioms



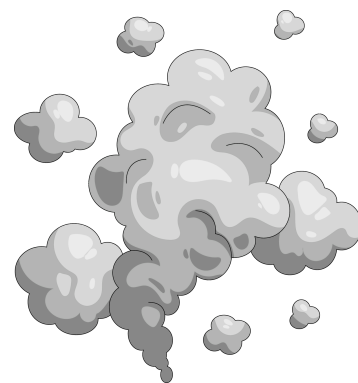
Match the idioms (1–8) to their meanings (a–h).

Idiom	Meaning
1. a recipe for disaster	a. to try to do more than you are able to manage
2. the last straw	b. to worry about something that can't be changed
3. out of the frying pan, into the fire	c. to be completely destroyed or to come to nothing
4. to go up in smoke	d. to have a lot of tasks or responsibilities
5. to bite off more than you can chew	e. a combination of factors likely to cause trouble
6. too many cooks spoil the broth	f. to go from a bad situation to a worse one
7. to cry over spilt milk	g. the final problem that makes a situation unbearable
8. to have a lot on your plate	h. too many people involved can ruin the result



Talk about it. Discuss in pairs or small groups, using the idioms where you can.

1. Have you ever bitten off more than you could chew? What happened?
2. Can you think of a time when too many cooks spoiled the broth?
3. What would be the last straw at a family dinner for you?
4. Is it ever useful to cry over spilt milk, or is it better to move on?
5. Do you have a lot on your plate at the moment? How do you cope?
6. Describe a plan of yours that went up in smoke.



6. Writing (Part 2 style)

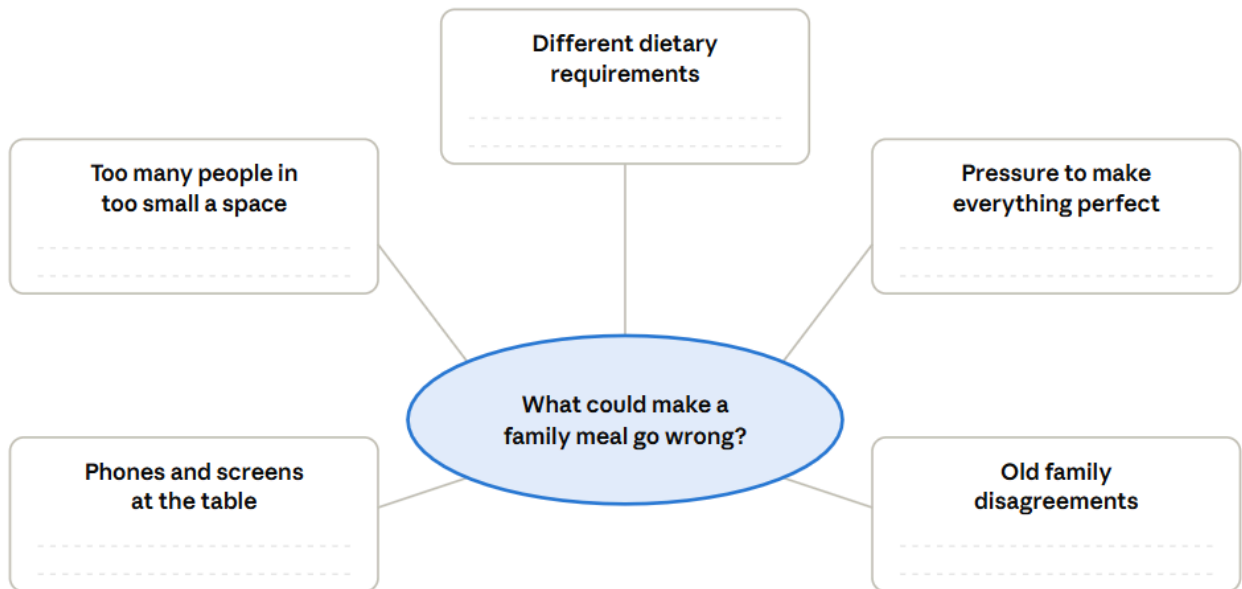
Choose one task. Write 220–260 words.

Option A: Apology email (semi-formal) You hosted a family dinner that went disastrously wrong. Write an email to your guests apologising, explaining what happened and suggesting how you will make it up to them.	Useful Language: I owe you all an apology for... I can only say how sorry I am that... I'd like to make it up to you by...	
Option B: Article for a school magazine (informal, humorous) Write an article called "The Worst Dinner Ever" about a real or invented meal that went wrong. Use narrative tenses and at least two idioms from this lesson.	Useful Language: It all started when... Little did we know that... No sooner had we sat down than...	

7. Speaking

Part 3-style task (pairs): Look at the five factors below. Talk together about how each one could cause a family meal to go wrong. Then decide which is most likely to cause a serious argument.

Which factor is most likely to cause a serious argument?



Part 4-style questions (whole class or groups)

1. Do you think shared meals are as important today as they were in the past?
2. Is it better to host a big dinner at home or to eat out? Why?
3. How much should hosts adapt a meal to guests' different diets?
4. Why do you think people laugh about things that were stressful at the time?

THANKSGIVING DINNER DISASTERS: ANSWER KEY (C1)

READING: THE YEAR OF THE FLYING TURKEY

- 1 A: a successful meal was out of character for Marcia's oven.
- 2 B: the family were used to the alarm going off every year.
- 3 C: the writer's tone is affectionately amused.
- 4 D: Danny, the new vegetarian, was the only one entirely satisfied.
- 5 B: family members remember the events differently.
- 6 A: "Just in case" is a humorous touch; the family half expects another disaster.

3a. NOTICING (possible answers)

Past simple: the smoke alarm went off; We ordered pizza.

Past continuous: she was arguing on the phone; everyone else was staring in horror.

Past perfect: Danny, who had just announced that he was now a vegetarian; She had ordered a free-range, twenty-pound bird.

Past perfect continuous: had been planning the meal; had been roasting; had been waiting under the table; we had been laughing for nearly an hour.

Inversion: Hardly had the alarm stopped ringing when my uncle Pete...

3b. PRACTICE: THE FROZEN TURKEY

- 1 spent
- 2 had never experienced
- 3 had already been cooking
- 4 was peeling
- 5 had taken
- 6 was still
- 7 was pointing
- 8 had we lit (accept: had we lighted)
- 9 had been sleeping
- 10 would be served (accept: was to be served / was going to be served)

11 was left

12 had ever had

13 has insisted

IDIOMS

1 e, 2 g, 3 f, 4 c, 5 a, 6 h, 7 b, 8 d

Talk about it: open answers. Encourage short anecdotes using the idioms and narrative tenses.

WRITING

Option A, apology email (semi-formal): sincere tone, explanation of what happened, a specific offer to make amends, warm closing.

Option B, magazine article (informal, humorous): engaging title and opening, narrative tenses, at least two idioms, direct address to readers, a memorable ending.

Assess with the C1 criteria, each out of 5: Content, Communicative Achievement, Organisation, Language.

SPEAKING

Part 3 (pairs): about 2 minutes to discuss how each factor could spoil a family meal, then 1 minute to decide which is most likely to cause a serious argument. Use the spider diagram for notes.

Listen for: turn-taking and responding to the partner, developing ideas, speculation (might well, could easily), comparison (far more likely to cause...).

Part 4 (open discussion): answers will vary.