



When Less Becomes More: A Reflection on Cooking, Presentation, and the Meaning of Academic Life

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Abstract

Academic reflection does not always begin in laboratories, classrooms, or manuscripts. Sometimes it begins at the dining table, when the body is tired, the mind is quiet, and the hands are doing something ordinary without ambition. The objective of this reflective commentary is to examine how an ordinary home cooking experience can generate broader insights into academic life by exploring how presentation, intentionality, and mindful arrangement shape engagement, interpretation, and scholarly communication. Using two photographs, this reflection follows a simple meal that began as “cooking for function” and later became “arrangement as meaning.” I argue that presentation is not superficial. It is epistemic because it shapes attention, appetite, interpretation, and willingness to engage. The shift from multiple containers to one composed plate became a domestic metaphor for how research outputs, teaching materials, and manuscripts gain life when they are framed with care. This reflection also connects everyday cooking to mediated culinary culture and technology, where cooking is increasingly shaped by screens, devices, and time saving narratives, and where food carries cultural meaning beyond nutrition. Finally, I relate the principle of “less is more” to academic minimalism through slow reading and collective silent writing practices that protect attention and restore dignity to scholarly work. The central claim is simple: doing less can be a way of seeing more, and arranging what already exists can be a form of ethical attention toward students, readers, and oneself.

Keywords: Minimalism; Presentation; Reflective Practice; Academic Writing; Food Meaning

Introduction

Academic reflection does not always begin in laboratories, classrooms, or manuscripts. Sometimes it begins at the dining table, when the body is tired, the mind is quiet, and the hands are doing something ordinary without ambition. On the day I captured two different photographs of my cooked meals, I cooked less than usual. There was no elaborate plan, no attempt to impress, and no expectation of productivity. The meal consisted of simple components prepared with efficiency rather than ceremony: fried egg with onions, preserved mustard tuber with chilies, semi cooked packaged chicken katsu, and cabbage with carrot and crab sticks. It was food shaped by realism rather than aspiration.

Yet reflection often emerges precisely from such moments. The absence of excess creates space for noticing. While preparing the meal, my attention drifted to two untouched items nearby: green grapes and small tomatoes. They were not part of the original plan, but they quietly demanded attention. This unplanned awareness marked the beginning of a shift from function to meaning.

This paper reflects on that shift. It is not a paper about food aesthetics or culinary creativity. It is a paper about how arrangement, framing, and intention transform experience, and how this transformation mirrors academic life in research, teaching, and writing. The ideas developed here build upon my broader reflections presented in *The Psychology of Cooking: Perspectives from Biology and Ecotoxicology* [1], in which cooking is explored not merely as food preparation but as a biological, ecological, and psychological practice that connects everyday meals with human behaviour, environmental awareness, and lived experience. The present paper extends those reflections by focusing specifically on how visual composition and mindful observation can transform an ordinary meal into an opportunity for scientific and personal reflection.

In food studies, cooking is not only a private act of nourishment. It is also a cultural practice shaped by media rhythms, social pressures, and the politics of time scarcity, where screens and celebrity chefs can offer predictable comfort amid uncertainty [2]. In parallel, academic life is also

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shaped by speed, performance, and a constant push to produce, which is why "less is more" has become a serious educational argument rather than a decorative slogan [3].

This reflective commentary aims to examine how an ordinary home cooking experience can generate meaningful insights into academic life, particularly the relationships among presentation, intentionality, and scholarly communication. Using two photographs of the same meal arranged in different ways, the paper explores how visual framing transforms not only aesthetic perception but also engagement, interpretation, and appreciation. Drawing upon perspectives from biology, ecotoxicology, food studies, and higher education, the reflection argues that thoughtful arrangement functions as an epistemic practice that shapes how knowledge is received without altering its intrinsic content. Ultimately, the paper seeks to demonstrate that the principle of "less is more" extends beyond culinary practice to research, teaching, and academic writing, where restraint, coherence, and mindful presentation can deepen understanding, enhance communication, and restore meaning to everyday scholarly work.

Cooking for Function, Not for Display

Figure 1 documents the meal as it was originally prepared and served: multiple dishes in separate containers, independent, practical, and sufficient. Each item is edible and complete, and the arrangement reflects a day shaped by restraint rather than indulgence. In this stage, food exists mainly as function. It meets needs, fits limited energy, and does not ask for interpretation.

This is not a deficiency. It is a mature baseline. In mediated culinary life, cooking is often pulled toward performance and spectacle, especially in cultures saturated by food programming and time saving narratives [2]. But Figure 1 reminds me that real cooking often resists spectacle. It is honest, direct, and sometimes deliberately plain.

This stage resembles much of academic work as it is actually lived. Research data collected carefully but not yet visualized thoughtfully. Teaching materials prepared with intellectual rigor but delivered without narrative rhythm. Manuscripts written with correctness but lacking invitation. The content exists, yet the interface remains neutral. The work waits passively for engagement.

Here, "less is more" is not a slogan about deprivation. It is a recognition that experience and fatigue force prioritization. In cooking, that may mean using semi prepared components, like packaged katsu, because time and energy are part of the equation. In academic culture, the equivalent is when one learns to stop overloading lectures, stop decorating figures excessively, and stop writing paragraphs that satisfy anxiety rather than clarity. The point is not to do less for laziness. The point is to do less so that what remains can be seen.

The Pause: Awareness as a Turning Point

The appearance of grapes and tomatoes in my mind was not accidental. It was not hungering speaking, but balance. Freshness appeared as a contrast to cooked textures and preserved flavours. This moment of noticing marked a cognitive pause, a reflective interruption that precedes insight but does not announce itself.

I did not add new cooking. I did not increase effort. Instead, I rearranged what already existed. This distinction matters. Innovation



Figure 1: Minimally prepared home meal served in separate containers, emphasizing function and sufficiency. Cooking for function, not for display. A simple home meal prepared with minimal planning and energy, served in separate containers, emphasizing practicality and sufficiency. Photo taken on 1 January 2026 by myself without any AI App manipulation.



Figure 2: The same meal reorganized on a single plate with white rice, tomatoes, and green grapes, emphasizing coherence, presentation, and engagement. Arrangement as meaning. The same cooked items reorganized on a single plate of white rice and ornamented with small tomatoes and green grapes, demonstrating how framing and composition transform appetite and engagement without adding new content. Photo taken on 1 January 2026 by myself without any AI App manipulation.

does not always require expansion. Sometimes it requires re seeing. In culinary technologies, one major promise of computer assisted cooking has been personalization and adaptation, not necessarily more ingredients, but better fitting and better decision making [4]. My small pause functioned similarly. The "new" thing was not a new dish, but a new relationship between elements.

This pause is familiar in long academic careers. Often the problem is not the lack of data, but the lack of framing. Not the absence of knowledge, but the absence of narrative. Not exhaustion from too much work, but exhaustion from work that has not been allowed to speak clearly. The academic temptation is to respond by adding more: more literature, more tables, more slides, more analyses. But sometimes what is needed is a quieter act: arranging what already exists into a form that can be received. This is precisely the educational logic behind slow reading, where reducing speed and volume can increase meaning and depth [3].

Arrangement as Meaning

Figure 2 presents the same meal reorganized onto a single plate of white rice. The rice becomes a neutral ground, a visual and conceptual canvas. The small tomatoes become focal points, almost like eyes. The grapes soften the composition. The cooked dishes find relational positions rather than isolated ones. Without increasing quantity or



complexity, the meal becomes expressive.

This act of arrangement transformed my response immediately. The same food now invited appetite. The eyes engaged before the mouth. Pleasure emerged not from novelty, but from coherence. Here, food behaves as a sign system. It carries message and mood. Even a simple plate can communicate care, identity, and social meaning beyond nutrition [5].

This is the central argument of the reflection. Presentation is not cosmetic. It is epistemic. It shapes how content is received, interpreted, and valued. In academic life, figures, tables, titles, abstracts, and tone perform this same function. They do not change the data. They change access. I have seen strong research ignored because it was poorly framed, and modest findings embraced because they were presented with clarity and care. Figure 2 is a domestic metaphor for that academic truth.

The same insight also appears in collective academic writing practices. "Shut Up and Write" sessions succeed not by adding motivation speeches or complex interventions, but by arranging time, silence, and shared focus into a simple structure that makes writing possible again [6]. In that sense, Figure 2 is my own "silent writing room" in food form: a structured arrangement that restores willingness to begin.

Packaging, Care, and Ethical Attention

The word "packaging" is often misunderstood, associated with marketing or superficial appeal. In this reflection, packaging refers to care. To arrange is to acknowledge that the recipient matters, even if the recipient is oneself. By arranging the food, I respected the effort already invested. I allowed the meal to be seen.

This resonates strongly with teaching. Students do not reject knowledge. They reject confusion, intimidation, and indifference. When material is thoughtfully arranged, it signals respect. The same applies to readers, reviewers, and colleagues. Arrangement is not manipulation. It is hospitality.

In adult learning, reflection is often described as a process of reorienting the self through lived experience, not by erasing the past but by re-reading it with new attention [7]. My plate became a small reorientation. I did not change the content of the day. I changed how I met the day.

This is also why food-related academic projects can become moral instruments. In food justice scholarship, researchers have shown how data practices and presentation choices shape public understanding of access and inequality, and how a carefully framed analysis can travel into real communities and real decisions [8]. The lesson is consistent across domains. What we present, and how we present it, can become an ethical act.

Less, Slower, and Truer

Figure 3 integrates two original photographs to demonstrate how an ordinary home-cooked meal evolves from a purely functional arrangement into a meaningful expression of care, intentionality, and thoughtful presentation. Rather than increasing the quantity or complexity of the meal, the transformation is achieved through mindful rearrangement, illustrating that sufficiency, rather than excess, can enhance engagement and appreciation. The central transition from "function" to "meaning" symbolizes the alignment of effort with intention, where presentation becomes an act of respect toward both the creator and the recipient.

Beyond food, the framework in Figure 3 proposes that the philosophy of "less, slower, and truer" offers a broader model for academic life. The three interconnected pillars advocate reducing unnecessary complexity (less), protecting attention through reflective and deliberate practice (slower), and pursuing authenticity by aligning intention, presentation, and meaning (truer). Influenced by principles of slow reading, collective writing practices, and reflective learning, the framework argues that thoughtful organization enhances communication without altering the underlying content. Ultimately, it suggests that meaningful scholarship, like meaningful cooking, emerges not from producing more, but from presenting

existing knowledge with clarity, care, ethical attention, and genuine purpose, allowing research, teaching, and writing to reconnect with their fundamental human values.

What this reflection ultimately reveals is a philosophy of sufficiency. Cooking less did not diminish the experience. Rearranging did not falsify it. Instead, both acts aligned effort with intention.

This is how “less is more” becomes practical in academic life. It is not an anti-productivity slogan. It is a defence of attention. Slow reading argues that reducing pace and content load can create deeper learning and stronger engagement [3]. Silent writing communities show that simple structures can restore creativity and well-being, not by doing more, but by removing noise [6]. My plate echoes both.

Figures 1 and 2 also show something about modern life. Cooking is increasingly entangled with mediated rhythms: screens, celebrity narratives, quick meal cultures, and time anxiety [2]. Technology can support adaptation and personalization, but it cannot replace the human act of noticing [4]. In my case, noticing was the turning point.

The “open mouth” response was not trivial. It was embodied confirmation that meaning had been restored. In academic terms, it was the moment when work feels worth doing again.

Conclusion

This reflection began with a simple meal and ended with a clearer understanding of how meaning quietly emerges through restraint, attention, and care. Cooking less did not reduce value, and rearranging what already existed did not distort reality. Instead, both acts revealed how coherence restores appetite, presence, and willingness to engage. In the same way, academic work does not gain life through accumulation alone, but through thoughtful framing that allows ideas to be seen, felt, and received. The movement from Figures 1 to 2 mirrors a longer scholarly journey, from producing content to cultivating clarity, from doing more to doing what matters. When effort aligns with intention, both food and knowledge regain their dignity. Sometimes, the most honest progress comes not from adding another dish or another paragraph, but from pausing long enough to arrange what is already on the table.

Declaration on the Use of Artificial Intelligence

The author declares that generative artificial intelligence tools were used in a supportive capacity during the preparation of this manuscript. These tools assisted with language refinement, structural organisation, and stylistic clarity of the text. All ideas, interpretations, reflections, and conclusions presented in this paper are the author's own and are grounded in personal experience and scholarly judgment. The author retains full responsibility for the content, accuracy, originality, and integrity of the manuscript.

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