

## Writing Restaurant Reviews Online

by JOSHUA LEE

I enjoy eating local food in places I visit. When I first came to Macau, I looked online for restaurant reviews and found the reviews in English to be limited. I also teach my university students writing, but many of them, particularly the lower-level students, are familiar only with a five-paragraph essay or writing for a test, with their teacher as the audience. These students tend to lack awareness of different writing genres or other audiences. A solution I came up with was to assign the students to write restaurant reviews.

### PURPOSE OF THIS GENRE OF WRITING

In some English as a foreign language (EFL) settings, students may contend there is little need for using English, or they may not see how English could benefit their society or culture. One way to counter this attitude involves having students use English to provide constructive restaurant reviews online and to learn more about their community and share their experiences. When students review local restaurants, they may be writing in a genre that is new to them in order to communicate with an audience interested in food. This assignment has also had the personal benefit of allowing me to “discover” local places to eat. More generally, if students post their reviews online, it gives useful information for tourists and other visitors to support local businesses.

Obviously, this assignment works best with students who have the means and ability to eat at

a restaurant. It is a type of experiential learning, which Kolb (2014) explains is a process rooted in experience with the environment and creating knowledge. Students can develop English language skills by writing their own restaurant reviews and by reading other reviews. When writing, they can be encouraged to draw upon their localized knowledge of places to eat and the local food culture.

### THE PROJECT

The project can be done in one class if the instructor wants students to write a review about a previous restaurant experience. A longer version of the project, which offers more benefits to students and which is the focus of this article, may take several weeks and is described in detail below.

#### Step 1: Audience awareness and sample reviews

As a warm-up, you may share a sample restaurant review and ask, “What kind of writing is this?” This can activate the students’ schema or background knowledge on the task, which can then improve understanding (An 2013). Students may have an informal discussion in groups or as a class, using these questions as a guide:

1. How do you decide which restaurant you want to eat at?
2. Have you ever read restaurant reviews online?

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3. What do you look for in a restaurant review? Or, if you haven't read one, what kind of information do you think you would find in a restaurant review?
4. Have you ever written a restaurant review in English or in your own language?

Using a sample review, students get an idea of the kinds of information presented in restaurant reviews, which often include descriptions of the kinds of food served, the quality of food, the service, the price, and the atmosphere. Students may also analyze the sample review and think from the writer's perspective. Many factors influence one's view of a dining experience, such as the timing of their visit to the restaurant, their food culture or preference, and their cultural background. How might these factors influence the writer's opinions?

Students can also consider the perspectives of the reviewers, which can differ from website to website. For example, reviews on HappyCow specify whether the reviewer is nonvegetarian, vegetarian, or vegan, and this may affect how the review is written. Reviews on Tripadvisor may indicate where the reviewer is from and whether they are part of a couple or a family; couples and families may consider and observe different things in a restaurant. Reviews on AllergyEats may indicate whether the person is allergic to certain foods, such as peanuts or shellfish; someone allergic to shellfish will not likely write positively about clams or oysters and probably will not order them at all; this could limit the value of the review for people who do not have the same allergy. On the website Zabihah, which specializes in reviews about Halal food, the audience may want to know whether a restaurant does or does not serve pork.

To find sample reviews, see the list in the Appendix and choose appropriate ones for your students' level. Showing samples can have advantages and disadvantages. For lower-level students, it gives them a model as a guide; however, it could also make their writing generic and may limit their creativity. You don't want students to simply copy the format or, worse, the actual writing.

### Step 2: Before eating out

This assignment can be done in groups of three or four, in pairs, or individually; having fewer people working together makes it easier to go to most restaurants without a reservation. Students could also go with their family or other friends. Grouping with classmates reinforces bonding within the class. Normally, my students share contact information and discuss outside of class about where to eat. However, if you want this step to be an in-class activity, you can turn it into a discussion where the group must reach consensus about where to eat, as this is a common conversation people have before eating out.

Here is a framework that I have adapted from Unger (2022):

1. Present the issue. ("Where are we going to eat together?")
2. Discuss. Here are sample guiding questions:
  - What do you like to eat?
  - Do you have any allergies [food that makes you unwell] or follow a particular diet (e.g., vegetarian)?
  - What kind of food do you not like?

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- How much are we willing to spend on our meal?
- What is a location that is easy for all of us to go to?
- How are we going to pay?
- When is a good time for all of us to eat together?

3. Propose suggestions. Now that students have an idea of the preferences of their classmates, they can propose restaurants that would fit those preferences. For this exercise, you might promote discussion and practice with giving reasons by requiring each group to suggest at least three possibilities.
4. Check for agreement. The group will have to come to a consensus about where to eat. If they fail to agree, they can go back to the discussion phase and change the proposed restaurants. Students may attempt to compromise by suggesting restaurants that fit multiple preferences.
5. Finally, if agreement cannot be reached, students may separate into smaller groups or eat on their own, with family members, or with other classmates. That is fine, as they have already gotten English practice by going through the process of discussing preferences and criteria, proposing restaurants, and trying to reach agreement.

**Step 3: Observation form (optional)**

The purpose of the observation form in Figure 1 is to provide students with a framework for writing notes that they can later refer to when they write their review.

They can also take pictures—but see Step 4 for notes and cautions about photos. The observation form is intended as a guide, especially for lower-level students. Higher-level students could use their own creativity regarding what they would like to observe or write about in their experience. Students can brainstorm ideas about what to observe at restaurants before seeing the observation form. Then they can adapt the form or add to it if they want. For all students, the observation form should be used as a suggestion but is not a fixed document.

**Step 4: Photo-taking advice and privacy (optional)**

I encourage my students to take pictures of food for their reviews. The pictures serve as evidence of having done the assignment, give them something to write about, and help the reader with a visual of the food.

If you decide to have your students post their reviews online (this is optional; see Steps 7 and 8 for suggestions), make sure they know that any photos they take and post online could be viewed by anyone in the world; therefore, they need to think about how the potential audience may react to the photo. My students have experience taking photos and posting online; however, it is still important to raise the issue of privacy.

Here are ground rules I have adapted from OpenTable's (2024) photo guidelines:

1. Photos should be clear.
2. Photos should show the dish *before* you eat it.
3. Do not use photoshopping tools, filters, or other alterations. Readers would like to see the food as it is!

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### 4. Do not take photos of people.

5. In general, take photos of the food only, but it might be acceptable to take photos of the front of the restaurant so that people may locate it.

Finally, and most importantly, *students should not be required to post their review or photos online*. Instead, they can simply submit the assignment in class but prepare it as if they were going to post it online for everyone to read.

Now the students are ready to go out and eat at a restaurant!

### Step 5: Writing the review—with adaptations for various levels of learners

Before students begin writing, they should be familiar with certain guidelines. After exploring a number of websites, I believe that most of them require that restaurant reviews do the following:

1. be based on firsthand experience (i.e., you were there and ate the food)
2. respect the privacy of people
3. contain no personal attacks
4. avoid discussion of illegal activities
5. use no offensive language
6. be free of promotion or advertisements

According to the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) section on HappyCow (2024), comments such as, “The [person] making the soup . . . has no taste and should get out of the restaurant business!” would be considered unacceptable and not helpful,

whereas commenting that the pumpkin soup was “totally tasteless” could be acceptable. You could use the guidelines from HappyCow as a template and adapt it.

The guidelines are a good prompt for class discussion on what would be acceptable in the restaurant-review genre. You can discuss issues such as what is considered an “illegal activity,” a “personal attack,” or “offensive language.” In general, restaurant reviews may be critical about the food, based on facts and one’s experience, but should not be written in a way that would hurt or insult someone. Of course, as an instructor, you may use your sole discretion, which HappyCow also does, meaning that it is up to you to determine what is considered “good taste” (no pun intended). If you want your students to explore this topic further, you can ask them to write a few sample sentences, in pairs or small groups, based on their previous dining experiences. Students then share and discuss—would those sentences be acceptable in a review? Why or why not?

### If you are teaching lower-level learners

If you are teaching lower-level learners, consider making a T-chart of positive and negative aspects related to restaurants, using basic words or phrases. This can be done as a class or individually on a piece of paper or tablet, as this starter chart shows:

Pros	Cons
Inexpensive Delicious	Small place Slow service

To prepare learners, bring pictures of various kinds of food with assorted flavors—for example, ice cream, tea, lemon, and chili pepper—and have students describe the tastes. You might ask students about the color of the lemon and how the chili pepper tastes. As an

aid, use facial expressions and body language for different flavors. For very spicy food, people may tend to wave their hand like a fan in front of their mouth as if it were on fire.

Ideally, you would pick foods students are familiar with to activate their prior knowledge. You can ask the class or have them work in groups to discuss questions such as “What kinds of flavors are there?” and “What are some words to describe a restaurant?”

Besides using basic words and the simple past tense, you can have your students use the pictures they took at the restaurant for discussions about food. You may also conduct guided writing as a class, where you write or type out sample sentences about different dishes—for example, showing a picture of food and then writing a sample sentence (e.g., “The pizza sauce tasted sour”). You may have the students suggest other sentences to describe the picture. Then the students can write a description of their food and their experience of eating it.

#### ***If you are teaching higher-level learners***

If you are teaching higher-level learners, you can approach the assignment by focusing on the discourse level of writing. For example, restaurant reviews are more interesting when written as a narrative or story, rather than as a list of facts only. This of course can affect the tense used in writing and the use of first-person point of view. Yule (1998) suggests that the present tense can be used for general facts and past tense for specific events. Namely, the simple past would be used to talk about the experience and to give background: “We went with friends to the restaurant at 6 p.m., and it was busy.” Later in the review, the past progressive can give the reader the sense of being there: “I was slurping the noodles, and the soup base had a mildly spicy flavor.” Finally, the present tense can state general facts about the restaurant: “The place delivers food, the food is inexpensive, and the servers speak English.”

Higher-level writers can include analytical writing and critical analysis of the food, the

restaurant, and their experience, describing the decorations and atmosphere of the place as well as using advanced vocabulary to describe the food.

#### **Step 6: Peer review of restaurant reviews (optional)**

Peer review is an important part of the writing process and gives the writer another audience for their work. The process benefits not only the writer, but also the peer-reviewer. Effective reviewers of writing tend to be audience-aware and are likely to give friendly feedback and to focus on global (e.g., content, organization) and local (e.g., grammar) issues (Chang 2015). The provider of the feedback may benefit in improvements on their own writing when they comment on their peers’ work (Lundstrom and Baker 2009).

When students peer-review, they can use the framework in Figure 2 for reviewing the content and language. This can be particularly helpful for lower-level students and students who are not familiar with restaurant reviews.

#### **Step 7: Choosing a platform for posting (optional)**

Different platforms and localities have varying policies on what is considered an acceptable restaurant review, and one should be aware of the local practices. Students may brainstorm places where they would post restaurant reviews in English; if they are not aware of any, you may suggest the ones in the Appendix.

Before students post a review, they should think about which platform would make the most sense for their review with a particular audience. For instance, posting about your favorite steak on HappyCow may not target the right audience. Again, students should not be required to post their reviews, but becoming familiar with the genre can improve their English skills and increase their awareness of the ways in which English is used.

#### **Step 8: Posting the review online (optional)**

We are finally at the last stage! If any students are going to post their review online, you can have students submit their work to you before

they post it. I personally read the students' reviews and provide feedback while learning about places to eat. This also gives you a chance to inform students who may have written offensive or inappropriate comments; remember, the focus of a restaurant review should be on the food!

The next step is learning how to post the review. I would suggest that students use whatever existing social media or online platform they are already familiar with, as this saves time. However, if they do not have an appropriate online platform that uses English, they could try the alternatives in the Appendix. You can see in the Appendix, though, that there are many options, and many more are not listed; for a busy instructor, trying to learn how to post on multiple platforms and instructing students would be time-consuming; thus, I recommend using a search engine to ask, "How do I post a restaurant review online?" Regardless of the platform a student chooses, students may use their actual name or an alias/pen name when they post. That depends on their privacy concerns and how this would affect the trustworthiness or reliability of the review.

Another key issue is the length of the review, which goes back to audience awareness and the intention of the writer. Most people who read a review are not looking to read a five-paragraph essay, but they would like to know key points about the restaurant and the food. A paragraph should be detailed enough, as reviews of only a few words or a sentence may not be specific enough to be helpful.

Note that if your students do not have access to computers or the internet, they may still handwrite reviews of favorite places they eat or dishes they have. Students may also draw pictures of food or different restaurants or stalls and then describe what they have drawn.

Finally, remind students to be honest, specific, and respectful in their reviews. Their feedback can help other diners make informed choices and support local businesses!

## CONCLUSION

This project is a means to avoid over-standardization in education—which we might also see in the processing of food. A focus on experiential learning allows for active engagement in the learning process. This project is a small step in achieving this dream and a way to diversify your taste buds!

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# OBSERVATION FORM

Your name: \_\_\_\_\_

Name of restaurant: \_\_\_\_\_

Address of restaurant: \_\_\_\_\_

Date of your visit: \_\_\_\_\_

## OBSERVING CUSTOMERS

Who did you go with?

\_\_\_\_\_

What time did you arrive?

\_\_\_\_\_

About how many people were at the restaurant?

\_\_\_\_\_

Describe the customers in general (People eating alone? Businesspeople? Families with children? Couples? Students?):

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Where do you think the customers are from? Why?

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Were people using their smartphones or computer devices during the meal?

\_\_\_\_\_

## OBSERVING EMPLOYEES

How many employees were there?

\_\_\_\_\_

What were the employees like? (age, dress, ethnic origin, etc.)

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

## OTHER OBSERVATIONS AND COMMENTS

How would you describe the atmosphere? (decorations, lighting, tables, seating, music/sounds, noise level)

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

What was the service like? (Friendly? Efficient? Fast/slow?)

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_



YOUR MEAL
What did you order?
Describe how it looked, smelled, etc.:
How big was the portion?
Describe the taste:
What else did you order (drinks, side dishes, dessert, etc.)?
OVERALL
What is your overall reaction to the restaurant and the food you ate?
What did you like best about the restaurant?
Did you notice anything that could be improved?
What was the cost of the meal? Does that seem reasonable to you?
Would you like to go back again? Why or why not?
Other comments that would be helpful to others (opening hours, whether the restaurant delivers, etc.)

**Figure 1. Observation form for gathering information to be used in a restaurant review**



## Sample peer-review sheet for guidance

1. Write or ask questions about parts that need more explanation or should be more specific (e.g., *The hamburger was good.* "Why was the hamburger good?").
2. Does the review avoid unacceptable things in the restaurant-review genre?
  - Offensive language (Circle any language you think may be offensive and discuss with your classmate why you think so.)
  - Mentioning personal details and private information about people, such as phone number, email, and home address. (Draw a star by any information you think is private.)
  - Using ALL CAPS? NO SHOUTING! Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_
  - Referencing illegal activities (Give verbal feedback on what you think is an illegal activity.)
3. Review the photos.
  - Comment on the quality of photos (blurry, clear, etc.) \_\_\_\_\_
  - Are the photos photoshopped or altered with filters? Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_
  - Are the photos of the food dish(es) *before* being eaten? Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_
  - Are there photos of people? Yes \_\_\_ No \_\_\_
4. What kind of people would benefit from this review (couples, vegetarians, etc.)? \_\_\_\_\_
5. Did the writer use tenses that helped with the writing? (Underline the verbs that confuse you as a reader.) \_\_\_\_\_
6. Is the review helpful? Does it give you clear information and help you decide whether you want to eat at that restaurant? \_\_\_\_\_
7. Is there any other information you would like the reviewer to provide about the restaurant or the food? \_\_\_\_\_

**Source:** Joshua Lee, adapted from general restaurant-review guidelines: HappyCow, <https://www.happycow.net/review-guidelines>; OpenTable, [https://help.opentable.com/s/article/Ratings-and-Reviews-1505261056054?language=en\\_US#Writeareview](https://help.opentable.com/s/article/Ratings-and-Reviews-1505261056054?language=en_US#Writeareview); Tripadvisor, [https://www.tripadvisor.com->Review->Writeareview->Learnmore->We\\_want\\_you\\_to\\_write\\_us\\_a\\_review..or\\_two,.or\\_three..;Yelp](https://www.tripadvisor.com->Review->Writeareview->Learnmore->We_want_you_to_write_us_a_review..or_two,.or_three..;Yelp), <https://www.yelp.com/guidelines>

**Figure 2. Sample peer-review sheet for use with restaurant reviews**

# APPENDIX

## Sources of sample reviews

These are English language websites for customers to write restaurant reviews; this is not a comprehensive list and should not be considered an endorsement. Even if you and your students do not post reviews on any of these sites, you can use them to gather information about restaurants and reviewing.

### AllergyEats

<https://www.allergyeats.com/>

A website specializing in users giving information about food allergies at restaurants

### HappyCow

<https://www.happycow.net/>

This website focuses mostly on restaurants for vegan (no eggs or dairy) and vegetarian (no meat) customers.

### OpenRice

<https://www.openrice.com/en/hongkong>

A website that includes English reviews of restaurants that are mostly in Hong Kong

### OpenTable

<https://www.opentable.com/>

A website that lets you reserve a table and write reviews in English

### Tripadvisor

<https://www.tripadvisor.com/>

A website used by those who travel; it can also be used to find restaurant reviews.

### Yelp

<https://www.yelp.com>

A website with restaurant reviews

### Zabihah

<https://www.zabihah.com/>

A website specializing in restaurants that serve Halal food

### Zomato

<https://www.zomato.com/>

A website that allows people to search for restaurants and to read and write restaurant reviews