



## Restaurant Reviews and College Writing: A Framework for Teaching

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### Abstract

Where do you want to eat? This common question gets answered not just by friends or family you are about to share dinner with, but by food critics as well, both professional and not. National newspapers have largely set the standard for restaurant reviewing where paid individuals follow an ethical and procedural framework. Joining the foodie discourse are amateurs writing on online restaurant review platforms, which have created opportunities for anyone to give an opinion of an eatery, but this open system is not without critique. While the two media forms operate quite differently, they are sites that create or diminish cultural capital for both the restaurant and the reviewer. Studying exemplars, students learn both restaurant review genres (professional and amateur) and their approaches to both good and bad, fine dining and street food. Writing their own reviews, students discuss their responsibility as journalists and food critics while questioning the taste, ambience, service, and value of the meal, thus laying claim to cultural capital. The capacity for students to use food writing as a means of practicing ethical writing while creating and affirming cultural capital is explored.

### Introduction

Restaurant reviews offer journalism and mass communication students a rich opportunity to learn journalist values of fairness, thoroughness, and precision, as well as create and affirm “culinary capital,” an extension of Bourdieuan theory to privileged food practices (Naccarato & LeBesco, 2012). Restaurant reviews capture the “culinary zeitgeist” of today, with its mixture of single, professional critics and unpaid, amateur masses (Siestema, 2010). As a result, the genre of restaurant reviews that are by definition “a description and evaluation of the experience of eating in a restaurant” (Blank, 2007, p. 45), has evolved from traditional print newspaper reviews to include online

public forums, but this is not without criticism (Siestema, 2010; Souder & Bottone, 2014).

For the past two decades, research has considered how culinary capital is created in various forms of media, including newspapers (Hou, 2012; Titz et al., 2004), food magazines (Baumann & Johnston, 2009), social media, including Facebook and Twitter (Rousseau, 2012), food blogs (de Solier, 2013) and online discussion forums (Frumkin, 2007; Naccarato & LeBesco, 2012; Vásquez & Chik, 2015). Much of this research has concentrated on either professional journalistic food writing or amateur food writing, not both. At the same time, the teaching of food writing is growing in interest in English composition courses

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es (see the special issue in *College English*, 2008), English as a Foreign Language classrooms (Bubel & Spitz, 2013), and journalism/mass communication classes. However, the pedagogical aspect of teaching food writing in a college writing class is missing, complete with lessons and assignment descriptions.

We add to this growing literature by teaching both critical theory and writing through food in our college course. In the lesson we describe below, we demonstrate ways in which restaurant reviews, from food blogs and online review sites to professional writing, provide a means through which individuals construct expertise and claim culinary capital. We examine two different linguistic and sociocultural contexts: professional newspaper reviews and non-professional food reviews, respectively. Newspaper reviews are selected (as opposed to magazine) reviews, as the role of professional restaurant reviewers corresponds to the rise of newspapers. The first restaurant review was in 1859 in *The New York Times*, which is still considered to be a highly esteemed newspaper and looked to as a standard bearer for food writing (Charney, 2016; Siestema, 2010). Online food reviews were also selected, as they have joined the foodie discourse, shifting restaurant reviewing from an exclusive cultural practice to open and mainstream forums. Significantly, online food reviews have been shown to affect consumer behavior (Kim et al., 2016; Rosen, 2012). Both food writing sources provide a means to discuss the greater hybridization of privileged and non-privileged food practices and provide two different genre styles to examine and practice in the classroom.

This paper brings a broadened perspective that is not contained in the space of ‘high’ and ‘low’ restaurant reviews by considering both professional and (amateur) online restaurant review forms as important genres. Students recognize their influential roles as journalists and as critics and the responsibility entailed in giving fair, honest reviews. Further, this discussion adds to current conversations about culinary capital by illustrating how it can be applied in the classroom through a restaurant review assignment. Students advance their writing skills while participating in the larger conversation of foodie discourse as a restaurant critic.

### Cultural Capital

In this academic writing assignment description, we present a lesson, *Restaurant Reviews and Cultural Capital*, we developed for our course *Food, Media,*

*& Culture* at the University of Florida. The class explores the language of American food “sites” --print material such as cookbooks, food magazines, newspapers; online and digital sources such as food blogs, celebrity chef websites, tv cooking shows; and places, such as restaurants, food markets, and grocery stores-- as symbols of class distinction through the lens of Bourdieu’s theory of cultural capital. The class prepares students to write food media from a journalism perspective.

In *Distinction* (1984), Bourdieu asserts that class tastes (not simply tastes in food but also art and music) are ways in which distinction is conferred and hierarchy established. Determined arbitrarily, food is an important marker of social status, and its assignment as a high or low value is a dynamic rather than static process. Extending Bourdieu’s study of cultural capital, Naccarato and LeBesco (2012) define “culinary capital” as engagement in “food related practices that reflect a certain set of values that are privileged over others” (p. 5). Restaurant reviews are examples in which food and food practices imply and confer status, identity, and power. For instance, a person knowledgeable about wine can compare and contrast menus from high-end restaurants, connoting an elitism and identity aligned with the educated upper-class.

Culinary capital, however, is not limited to high food cultures. Johnston and Baumann (2010) stress that a “foodie” or a person “with a passion for eating and learning about food” is not limited to a specific type of food (p. 591). Instead, being a foodie is to invoke a certain stance or attitude towards food, including food consumption at a restaurant in this case. This figure, an aspirant middle-class gourmet consumer, is faced with a multitude of conflicting advice regarding food consumption. Americans are eating out and spending on food more than ever (Nielsen, 2018). “‘What to choose?’ becomes a “tormenting, invasive, and occasionally insurmountable question” (Warde, 1997, p. 30). The restaurant review seems to address this social need for knowledge. As Ashley et al. (2004) note, “restaurant reviews provide a fruitful site for understanding the construction of the foodie” (p. 149).

Blank (2004) argues that the key role of the restaurant review is to provide this knowledge—appropriate criteria, direct evaluation, and broader information about what is the ‘right’ restaurant to choose. The ‘right’ choice brings the individual the ‘appropriate’ product, but more importantly confirms their taste and social position (Bourdieu, 1984). Ac-

According to Wood (1996) and Fattorini (1994), restaurant reviews, aimed at a specific audience, primarily the aspiring middle class, both reflect and are part of the process that constructs “symbolic struggles” surrounding cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 244). Bourdieu (1984) postulates that the dominant class in a society affirms its high social status through consumption of cultural beliefs and values. Over time, the dominant class can lose these cultural symbols to the lower classes and must adopt new beliefs and values to maintain its distinctiveness. This defense over dominant cultural symbols gives rise to discourses of distinction, including ‘excessive refinement’ and ‘ease.’ We propose here that restaurant reviews play an essential role in this battle over culinary knowledge, and not just from trained critics and foodies.

Hierarchy and status are also important aspects of online review platforms whose function is to provide a map to post and access reliable information. For example, Yelp distinguishes itself from other review sites in creating culinary capital: “Our approach is very different from other sites that tend to feature every single negative rant and positive rave. We nurture a community of users who actively contribute reliable and useful content” (Yelp.com). The premise is that Yelp helps us eat well. Separating members from ‘ordinary people’ is the Yelp Elite Squad, people active in the Yelp community and role models on and off the site for their well-written reviews, high quality tips, active voting, and more (Yelp.com). These reviews construct knowledge for a particular social group while defending this knowledge through monitored reviews from the ‘ordinary’ consumer.

Other online review sites (Citysearch, Chowhound, Zomato, etc.) similarly provide the necessary knowledge for the aspirant user to participate in the ‘foodie-ness’ by providing ‘honest,’ ‘trust-worthy,’ and ‘relevant’ reviews (Citysearch, 2018). For example, Scouts and Captains of Citysearch are “in the know expert writers, connoisseurs, movers and shakers” (Citysearch, 2018). Access to resources to participate in this class of ‘foodies’ and ‘movers and shakers’ is mediated by the context within which reviews are located; that is, they are situated within Citysearch, which can be seen through their own description of readership, middle to upper class. The reviews are part of the discourse of exclusion and key “engines of distinction” (Williamson, et al., 2006, p. 60). Therefore, the way food and knowledge about food is represented in reviews, both restaurant and online, works to

construct distinction and exclusion.

### History of Restaurant Reviews in the United States

Lifting restaurant reviews out of the realm of marketing and making them a public service is Craig Claiborne, who in 1957 became the food editor at the *Times*. Credited with being the “inventor of the modern restaurant review” (Sietsema, 2010, p. 42), Claiborne established an ethical and procedural framework for restaurant reviewing: reviews would be done by an individual, following at least three visits at the restaurant, and each visit with at least three or four diners in order to cover the menu as much as possible. Some dishes were tested more than once for consistency. Dining was conducted anonymously, and meals paid by the individual and reimbursed by the *Times*. Claiborne realized that special treatment if recognized and acceptance of free food would create a journalistic conflict of interest. If reviews were to be trusted and conducted with no prejudice, reviewers must adhere to rules that transferred credibility on their conclusions.

Following Claiborne’s lead rose a wave of newspaper restaurant critics whose influence extends today. In contrast to Claiborne’s direct and informational approach, Gael Greene reviewed restaurants with flamboyant prose and hyperbolic language. Mimi Sheraton shared her dining experiences with readers in a confidential tone and sensuality, a style of writing that became known as “food porn,” writing intended to stimulate the salivary glands through its emphasis on the appearance and flavor of food. With a journalism background, Ruth Reichl weaved dialogue into her reviews, giving a sense of reality to the review and letting the restaurant ‘speak’ for itself.

Upholding Claiborne’s ethics, Reichl, in an assessment of Le Cirque, wrote a two-part review: the first part accounted for the shabby service as an unrecognized diner, and the second part, a great improvement in service and food: It was not until the fourth time at the restaurant, “When I [Reichl] was discovered, the change was startling. Everything improved: the seating, the service, the size of the portions” (Reichl, 1993, p. 1). While college students are not in the same visible and influential position, learning how journalists strive to stay objective and not compromise their reviews provides students a model for their own reviewing practices.

Claiborne’s tenets of literary and journalistic

standards continue to be upheld. Pete Wells (2018), the current restaurant reviewer for *The New York Times*, explains that the criteria for rewarding stars is to “reflect the reviewer’s reaction primarily to food, with ambience, service and price taken into consideration (p. 1).” He adds that “the relative weight placed on each factor is up to the critic, as is the meaning of ‘poor,’ ‘extraordinary’ and the other qualitative terms” (Wells, 2018, p. 1). Further, he admits that while critics dine anonymously, with the goal to have the experience the same as the average diner, they may be recognized and often are.

User-generated online content, from food blogs to online review sites (Yelp, Chowhound, etc.), play an increasingly important role in contemporary food discourse. On the one hand, online reviews provide an alternative to elite forms of restaurant reviews, allowing for diversity in voices and perspectives. For example, as Vásquez and Chik (2015) argue, “online restaurant review sites do provide an audience for foodies to claim diverse forms of culinary capital and to share their gastronomic experiences with others” (p. 232). Despite such apparent democratization in food consumption and in food discourse, on the other hand, review sites may simultaneously reproduce social hierarchies and some forms of culinary capital. Paradoxically, the online practice keeps the focus ever more fixed on the culinary elite (Naccarato & LeBesco, 2012). The food choices as well as literary standards of professional writers continue to wield much influence in dinner choices and contemporary food discourse (Sietsema, 2010; Vásquez, 2014).

### **College English Courses Teaching Food Writing:**

College English courses have embraced food writing, from a range of perspectives. In 2008, the journal *College English* published a special issue on food, discussing ways to integrate food writing into the academic context. Topics included teaching food memoirs and food literature in the classroom. Waxman (2008) suggests that food memoirs have the power to stimulate and link smells, tastes, strong emotions, and memories. In their English classrooms, Cognard-Black and Goldthwaite (2008) discuss how food literature, including menu poems, cookbook memoirs, novels in recipes, to foodie films, is an expression of identity and self: “to teach food as a written art form is to teach a part of what it means to be human” (p. 422).

Similarly, incorporating food literature into the classroom, Bloom (2008) identifies and analyzes the

essential elements of the rhetoric of food writing, among them including the core understanding that food is a significant subject and especially relevant here, that “readers must trust the integrity, authority, and therefore the judgment and tastes the authorial persona” (p. 354). Like a recipe writer, food critics must be “absolutely reliable narrators” (p. 354). Modern society still recognizes the necessity of specialized knowledge and experience to determine when, why, and how culinary capital is distributed, a liberal framework that relies upon specific hierarchies identified by Rose (1999). Professional journalism depends upon a notion of expertise through which journalists acquire credibility and authority. Across the supposedly egalitarian landscape with online restaurant reviewing, simultaneously, these reviews accept the authority of culinary experts and continue to maintain hierarchies of distinction (Johnston & Baumann, 2010).

Against the backdrop of a broad cultural canvas of food, media, and culture, our upper-level undergraduate course, Food, Media, and Culture, focuses on the genre of restaurant reviews for two weeks to analyze notions of culinary capital and of privileged food practices. The first lesson of the class studies the emergence and development of the genre of restaurant reviews, from instructional, connoisseurship, to narrative, and consumerism-driven. We also consider how restaurant reviews, like Appadurai (1988) observes of cookbooks, are “revealing artifacts of culture in the making” (p. 22). Students then engage in discussion on the ethics of food writing, addressing issues such as free versus paid reviews. Exposed to Bourdieu and the workings of culinary capital, students discuss the ways in which “food and food practices act as markers of social status” (Naccarato & LeBesco, 2012, p. 2). The lesson finishes with the students writing their own critical analysis of a dining experience.

### **Restaurant Review Lesson**

This Restaurant Review assignment allows students to practice and develop their new knowledge of restaurant reviewing, and also complements the larger course goals that prepare students in the fields of journalism and communications, especially in food media, a career booming in the last decade. The hybridizing of the restaurant review has resulted from the democratizing technology of the internet (De Solier, 2017) and the resilience of the professional journalistic approach. The recommended time length is two weeks, including two weekends so that students

have sufficient time to eat at the restaurants.

**Genre analysis – open vs professional restaurant reviews:** We teach the lesson through a genre approach, whose pedagogical advantages are not only beneficial for students but also for teachers. According to Hyland (2007, p. 150), the genre pedagogy is:

<b>Explicit</b>	Makes clear what is to be learnt to facilitate the acquisition of writing skills
<b>Systematic</b>	Provides a coherent framework for focusing on both language and contexts
<b>Needs-based</b>	Ensures that course objectives and content are derived from students' needs
<b>Supportive</b>	Gives teachers a central role in scaffolding students' learning and creativity
<b>Empowering</b>	Provides access to the patterns and possibilities of variation in valued texts
<b>Critical</b>	Provides the resources for students to understand and challenge valued discourses
<b>Consciousness-raising</b>	Increases teachers' awareness of texts to confidently advise students on writing

*Figure 1.* Attributes of genre pedagogy. Reprinted from “Genre pedagogy: Language, literacy and L2 writing instruction” by K. Hyland (2007), *Journal of Second Language Writing*, 16, 150.

Guided by this methodology, we consider the restaurant review as a “genre-as-text,” or “studying the linguistic features and organizational features of collected instances of texts” (Hyland, 2007, p. 212). As a class, we study “instances” of two online restaurant reviews from Yelp, one of the most popular and well-known American multinational online review forums with over 155 million reviews (Yelp, 2018), and two professional restaurant reviews from *The New York Times*, considered to be the “gold standard of newspaper food sections” (Brown, 2004, p. 53). (Yelp also provides reviews for other local businesses like dentists, hair stylists, and mechanics, but food reviews make up the majority.) We ask students not only to examine stylistic elements, but also to recognize how restaurant reviews are “communicative events”:

A genre comprises a class of communicative events, the members of which share some set of communicative purposes ... exemplars of a genre exhibit various patterns of similarity in terms of structure, style, content, and intended

audience. (Swales, 1990, p. 58)

We also explore how reviews compare to other genres, especially stories, with form guiding and guided by the goal of the text.

Genre adherents argue that people don't just write, they write something to achieve some purpose: writing is a way of getting things done. To get things done, to tell a story, request an overdraft, craft an essay, describe a technical process, and so on, we follow certain social conventions for organizing messages.... (Hyland, 2003, pp. 5-6)

These “social conventions” help writers achieve their purpose and also aid their readers to make sense of the text by anticipating what the writer will include from previous texts. As a class, we discuss how reviewers pursue a certain goal, such as the retelling about and reviewing of a dining experience in this case, and how readers-consumers expect certain features. Activating students' awareness of the genre and giving them a “schema” (Hyland, 2007, p. 150) prepares them to express themselves efficiently and effectively on the features of food commentary in a dining out context.

By understanding the genre of online and professional reviews, it is simultaneously possible to identify the extent to which such reviews arise as both a function of journalistic and culinary values. In class, we discuss food critics' ethics and guidelines, considering the codes presented by journalism organizations, such as the Association of Food Journalists. The association developed standards, such as total transparency in their work and acknowledgement of any special treatment, free meals, or conflict of interest in the event of reporting a story (AFJ, 2018). Yelp also gives guidelines on reviewing, such as contributions are to be relevant, appropriate, accurate, and up-to-date, aspects particularly advantageous of online platforms. That is, reviewers can revise their reviews later upon new insights and additional experiences, and readers can trust the information as the most current as possible.

Then, we discuss how food commentary is rarely socially neutral and tends to perpetuate a culinary hegemony in which the public taste is considered inferior. In order to elicit the relationship between distinction and reviews, we discuss the relationship the concept of consumer choice from a variety of food sources and the power of restaurants to circumscribe the food choice of the consumer. As Mooney (1994) remarks, “the menu ... serves as a limit on what a foodservice operation is willing and able to prepare and serve” (p. 45). The restaurant operator's percep-

tions about ‘good taste’ largely determine the contents of the menu, which is in itself a “marketing tool” and “the only piece of print advertising that the customer will almost certainly read when using the operation” (p. 45). We add that reviews are the next most important textual information to read about a restaurant.

We also discuss the economic impact of online reviews on restaurants. Although unpaid, online writers can create capital for restaurants with positive reviews, as well as with negative reviews, surprisingly (Ghose & Iperiotis, 2011). By drawing attention to the restaurant, even if negative, consumers are more aware of the eatery that they may not have been otherwise. Moreover, prior research has shown that online reviews are more influential than traditional forms of advertising; a one-star increase led to 59% increase in revenue of independent restaurants (Luca, 2011). Whether reviews are positive or negative, evaluation is a primary function. To further the class discussion, we explore some of the linguistic resources that reviewers use to evaluate restaurants and to tell their story of their experience.

Online review sites also allow individuals to engage in culinary discourse. Motives for posting online can range from concern for other consumers (diners in this case), self-enhancement (fostered by Elite status or Badges), emotional outlet, and desire to help or hurt the company (i.e., restaurant) (Hennig-Thurau et al., 2004, p. 44). Vásquez (2014) emphasizes the relational aspect of online reviews, observing ways in which reviewers use language that allow for interaction with others. Virtual review sites enable foodies to share their passion for food with a community whose interests align. This is especially rewarding for those whose family and friends do not share the same enthusiasm and interest in food.

We then provide students with a list that identifies the main conventions of both professional restaurant reviews and online reviews (Figure 2: Restaurant Review Features, Right).

Due to their unedited nature, online reviews vary much more than professional restaurant reviews in terms of quality and quantity in the description and evaluation of the eatery. While the better reviews have many if not all of the features above, they tend to be much shorter, even some consisting of single lines. One recent study shows that social class is often implicated in online restaurant reviewing practices. Using a computational approach to Yelp restaurant reviews, Jurafsky et al. (2014) find that class-based

**Figure 2.**  
**Restaurant Review Features**

<b>Title</b>	Capture the critic’s opinion; include the restaurant’s name, and provide enough clues so the reader knows what type of food is served
<b>Key Information</b>	Include the restaurant name, star or number rating, culinary style, address, hours of operation, contact information, price range
<b>Layout</b>	Describe the restaurant layout, diners, music, temperature, décor, and overall comfort level
<b>Review</b>	Review the food with precision and evocatively; write with vivid adjectives, sensory details, and sensuality; use metaphors; mention specific dishes, from appetizers to the main course to dessert
<b>Service</b>	Comment on the service; include snippets of dialogue
<b>Summarize</b>	Provide a final evaluation
<b>Rating</b>	Assign a star ( <i>Yelp</i> , <i>The New York Times</i> , <i>Michelin</i> , <i>Zagat</i> ), fork ( <i>Eater</i> ), emoji ( <i>OpenRice</i> ), etc., based on the rating system of the intended publication site

differences are realized in linguistic features: reviewers of high-end restaurants used more sensual descriptive writing and complex words, in order “to portray the reviewer as educated and possessed of higher linguistic capital” (p. 10).

An additional implication for online food reviewing as a social marker is the technological capabilities. Restaurant review sites are multimodal platforms that allow consumers to inscribe information about their food-related choices in diverse discursive ways, including the use of capitalization, emphatic punctuation, emoticons, emojis, and the option to upload photos. In their comparative analysis of *OpenRice* and *Yelp* online review sites, Chik and Vasquez (2016) find that “the website’s architecture can either constrain or encourage the use (or non-use) of specific semiotic resources” (p. 3). Specifically, *Yelp*’s simple computer interface (see Figure below) encourages customers to write a short, general evaluation along with providing a star-rating and an open-ended comment. The option to use emojis is not given like *OpenRice*, and emoticons are infrequent. Rather, forms of orthographic emphasis (punctuation, capitalization) are

frequent. Surprisingly, photos are infrequent due to the visual nature of food. Yet, the site construction of Yelp makes loading photos cumbersome; reviewers must click on another page from the review itself to post a photo, an additional step that drastically reduces the number of photos.

As a class, we discuss ways in which reviewers can claim culinary capital on online reviewing sites, which operate in different computer interfaces. We explore how access to technology and social class are implicated in online restaurant reviews. In addition, as Chik and Vásquez (2016) have noted, we consider how the multimodality affects the self-presentation. As Johnston and Bauman (2010) explain, “self-presentation as food-obsessed is an important marker of who is a foodie and also explains how being a foodie is most often understood as a social, rather than solitary activity” (p. 64). Online restaurant reviews allow diners to share their dining experience with a “food-obsessed” community, as well as an opportunity to claim culinary expertise and shape discourse about food themselves. In this way, individuals are able to both create new hierarchies in food culture, but also reproduce some forms of culinary capital.

After working through examples in class, students read additional reviews and participate in a Discussion Board: Food Descriptions (Appendix C: Food Descriptions). They come up with three new adjectives per category (Taste and Smell; Texture; Appearance; Sound; Others) for a total of 15 adjectives without duplicating entries. Contributing to this list helps students draw their attention to various ways food can be described, and it becomes a resource in their own writing for the class and future career writing.

Then, students are given two weekends to complete their restaurant reviews. Besides participating in virtual communities of foodies, students can claim culinary capital using a variety of discourse strategies, including language, orthography, and multimodal features.

**Restaurant Review Assignment:** This restaurant review assignment asks students to 1) identify and use the social convention, linguistic features, and rhetorical structure of both professional and online restaurant review genres; 2) write two restaurant reviews fairly and descriptively, and 3) explore how food and eating out are part of one’s culinary capital.

For this assignment, students compose two restaurant reviews, one intended for a newspaper and one for an open forum [See Appendix A]. They

dine three times at a restaurant of their choice, but not fast-food or chain restaurants, which are rarely reviewed as the eatery model is for food to taste the same at each franchise. An additional criteria is no personal connection with the owners. To capture their thoughts and experiences, students take notes on the Restaurant Review Template [See Appendix B]. They are encouraged to use the same eating experiences for both reviews. Students consider the quality and quantity of food and beverage, service, ambience and atmosphere, menu variety, price value, other customers, and professionalism, key categories identified by Titz et al. (2004) of restaurant reviews.

**Reflections:**

**Cultivating Writing Skill and Culinary Capital**

The assignment proved to be more successful (and enjoyable!) than we anticipated. We measured its success by how well it achieved the lesson objectives: students practiced food writing, a growing field in their intended careers in journalism and communications; students practiced a disciplined approach to writing reviews; and students recognized how restaurant reviews actively construct knowledge and social relations, or culinary capital.

When analyzing our students’ reviews, we found that the major values promoted—authenticity and openness to try new foods—were similar to what was promoted in food magazines (Baumann & Johnston, 2008) and online reviews (Naccarato & LeBesco, 2012). For instance, one student reviewer displayed her knowledge about pizza from a newly opened pizza restaurant: “I think it’s safe to say that no one had experienced wild-yeast sourdough pizza from this re-

**Figure 3**  
**Reviewer Interface for Yelp**

Restaurant Name	Overall Evaluation
Rating	Review
Your Review	
Review Guidelines	

Reprinted from A. Chic & C. Vásquez (2016), “A comparative multimodal analysis of restaurant reviews from two geographical contexts,” Figure 3, p. 12.

gion before.... Chewy and charred, real Italian style.” She continued, putting her review into dialogue with other online reviewers: “As made evident from quite a few Yelp reviews, some people believe the pizza to be burnt. I assure you, it’s not.” The student’s emphasis on the authenticity of the dish is similar to the broader lesson that Baumann and Johnston (2008) observed in food magazines in regards to authenticity: “Cultural sophistication requires a preference for genuine, original experiences, which themselves require a great deal of expert knowledge to find and enjoy fully” (p. 63). The student’s claim to knowing ‘real Italian style’ pizza displays a culinary refinement that only a few (i.e., other foodies) can appreciate.

The desire for the new, the unfamiliar, the exotic prompted another student to dine at a restaurant featuring cuisine she’s not yet experienced—“authentic” cuisine. For the food adventurer, familiarity with the Latin American cuisine, still unfamiliar to most of readers, is considerable cultural capital, in Bourdieu’s term. In evaluation of the meal, the student states, “it is very difficult for a restaurant to feel authentic when preparing food that you are very familiar with.” Because “croqueta preparada” (fried croquette) and Latin food are familiar to the student, she questions it to be genuinely of her culture.

Another example illustrates the exotic as familiar. One student writes, “Eclectic, quirky and spicy, this little hole-in-the-wall seems almost like a metonym for my feelings for Jacksonville as a whole. This trip was even more special as it was the first time my mom and I took her boyfriend there. I was ready to impress this world-traveler with Corner Taco’s zesty vibe and plate.” Although Mexican restaurants and ingredients are readily available for American readers, availability does not automatically spell familiarity. The student emphasizes that the atmosphere, “eclectic, quirky and spicy,” offers reassurance of exoticism. It assures the nervous student and hostess, seeking to impress her guest (her mom’s boyfriend and ‘world-traveler’), that she is not simply naïve or ignorant. This food really has a “zesty vibe and plate.” One does not have to be embarrassed about eating there, because it really is! Also, it may confirm for readers that the food they would eat is, in some objective sense, exotic, and even familiarity with it cannot alter that fact. Its exoticism means that readers will earn cultural capital if they eat there with their friends and guests, for whom home-cooked Mexican food is likely to be a novelty.

Novelty is also attractive to adventuring food

world-travelers, or “food colonizers” (Heldke, 2013 [2001], p. 398), because it suggests the presence of the exotic, where exotic represents something excitingly unusual. Exotic food is understood as authentic, because of it is obscure and unknown (Heldke, 2013 [2001]). Because the Corner Taco is unfamiliar to her guest and world-traveler, the student assumes it might be a genuine part of Jacksonville and that culture of Florida; the Corner Taco becomes the marker of what distinguishes her culture from another. What is novel to the boyfriend and by extension the reader is exotic, and that which is exotic is defined as most authentic to a culture. In this way, the quest for culinary capital shows up in online restaurant reviews with the emphasis of the exoticism of food having its roots in novelty and the unfamiliar.

Displaying expertise and foodie knowledge are also a common theme. One student shares his ‘go-to-order,’ implying that he is very familiar with the restaurant. Another student indicates her expertise in her comparison of the meal with past meals: “although a bit dryer than most pulled pork sandwiches as it was not tossed in a ton of barbecue sauce, the sandwich was deliciously smoky.” Still another student, a self-described “guac connoisseur,” identifies himself as a source of authority and credible information. In presenting such familiarity with guacamole, as indicated by the abbreviation, the student becomes to the readers a kind of culinary expert.

The value of the dish was also important, but surprisingly, considering the students’ limited budget, after the food and atmosphere. Value, distinct from cost which is simply the price of the meal, refers to whether loss is outweighed by other benefits, such as economic loss for the gain of nourishment. For restaurants, gain also is symbolic for its display of culinary capital in the discernment of a good meal. Students seemed willing to pay if the perceived value was enough, both for high-end restaurants, such as at a sushi restaurant where one student reviewer noted that, “the meal was filling and tasty, but also pricy,” and low-end, such as at a food truck, where a student complained that, “despite only being served two tacos with each order, it was just enough to enough to satisfy my hunger. With a drink, my lunch there ended up costing me \$11 and some change, which I found to be a bit expensive for a food truck. Even with the higher prices, I would still suggest Finns to people visiting the area.”

For the majority, the taste of the food was the biggest determiner in the overall dining experience.



For instance, at Ballyhoo's Grill, a student ordered a steak and "even though it is on the upper end of the price range, it is totally worth it because it was flavorful, and its tastes were appetizing and pleasant." Continuing her assessment of the restaurant, the student notes that, "the portion size was also quite big, which makes the price adequate for the meal that you receive, at around \$16. I thought that was reasonable considering the great taste of the pie, the location, and what you get for your money!" The students' priority for the quality of the food supports the work of Titz et al. (2004) and Williamson et al. (2009) who find that in restaurant reviews in newspapers and magazines respectively, value follows food, service, and ambience. Similarly, Lane (2014) notes in her interviews with renowned chefs, diners, and Michelin reviewers that ultimately "quality" or "if it tastes good" is the guiding principle.

A final note is that students used semiotic devices to enhance their reviews, especially on their online reviews. The use of punctuation, especially exclamation marks, and capitalization were used often for emphasis, similar to the findings of Chik and Vásquez (2016) of Yelp and OpenRice reviews. For instance, a student writes about the portion sizes at a Mexican restaurant: "Every table comes with its own endless supply (and I mean ENDLESS) of chips and salsa....The chimichanga is for the person who smartly enough didn't stuff their faces with chips and guacamole, as it is HUGE!" The capitalization plus exclamation points represent the louder volume if spoken and symbolically gives volume and size to the food itself. Another student explained her beverage selection at a Thai restaurant by emulating the menu: "The Nom Yen stood out to me the most on the menu because of its description: 'Pink milk, caffeine free. Sweet, creamy and PINK!' I wondered what Nom Yen would taste like." The student uses typography to show rather than tell the restaurant's style. Additionally, many students uploaded photos to their reviews, with the majority close-up overhead shots, Instagram-style.

### **Conclusion: Connecting Theory with Practice, Academic with Public**

This interdisciplinary food, media, and culture course teaches students the genre of restaurant reviews through a series of lessons that culminates in food commentary of their own dining experiences intended for submission to a respectable newspaper and to an online food review portal. Students submit their

assignment for class credit but also contribute to the field of journalism and food media. Students recognize that food is not the only reason for people to dine out. Thus, academic work, prone to critique for being isolationist and detached from real world issues, is made practical and applicable in the immediate and local context as well as to the students' future careers.

Further, we hope that students recognize their influential role as journalists and responsibility as restaurant reviewers whose underlying mission is to inform, presenting the professional aspects of high and low gastronomy as intellectually and practically accessible to the reader-consumer. Learning to sell "interest" in their text through semiotic devices, such as glossy photos, highlighted captions, and eye-catching titles (Fattorini, 1994, p. 25), students participate in as well as encourage aspiring readers to identify with and believe in the possibilities of participating in culinary capital. Adherence to high standards of writing, both aesthetically and ethically, works to validate the practice of restaurant reviews in the "quality" press—both newspapers and online reviews—as academic in character. This assignment has sought to argue that despite food commentary generally situated within the arena of "food snobbery" (Wood, 1996, p. 5) or commentary on issues that are socially exclusive, there is a bulk of such writing evident in the public domain as well. While food commentary is rarely socially neutral, this public writing tends to perpetuate culinary hegemony (Johnston & Baumann, 2010; Naccarato & LeBesco 2012).

The growth of online review sites has led to research from multidisciplinary fields, such as linguistic analyses (Danet & Herring, 2007; Seargeant & Tagg, 2014, etc.) and multimodality (Thurlow & Mroczek, 2011; Chik & Vasquez, 2016, etc.). Yet, the teaching of reviews has more room for discussion, because it is important to teach future journalists ethical writing and uphold standards of professional writing. In addition, the majority of scholarship has approached food and dining out from a sociological behavior perspective (Blank, 2007; De Solier, 2017) or marketing and consumption (Ghose & Ipeirotis, 2011). In an effort to contribute to our understanding of these research areas—cultural theory, online discourse, food consumption and marketing—in this article, we provide a theoretical and practical approach of online restaurant reviews in the classroom. To our knowledge, this combined perspective is one that is not commonly found in research on online discourse, or on reviews

more specifically.

To expand the lesson, teachers could have students follow up on their online restaurant reviews that are then public and respond to potential interactions with readers.

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**Appendix A:**

**Restaurant Review Assignment**

Dine at an eatery of your choice following these guidelines: no fast food, no franchise, no personal connections with the owners, and it must have been open for at least three months.<sup>1</sup> Go at least three times, preferably different times and days. Go with two to three others if you can so you can sample more dishes. You are encouraged to take photos.

Write two restaurant reviews that would appear on 1) a newspaper or nationally respected website that covers food and 2) an online open forum. Describe the quality and quantity of food and beverage, quality of service, ambience and atmosphere, menu variety, price and value, other customers, and professionalism. Provide details and a balanced, evidence-based, and accurate account. Use the Restaurant Review Template each time you go to help you take notes (you'll also turn all three templates in with your final review).

When writing your restaurant reviews, refer to the Restaurant Review Features chart, the class Discussion Board: Food Descriptions, and consider these principles:

- *Offer some background.* Describe the context of the dining experience. Where are we? Why are we here? When did we go? Describe the restaurant. Who is the chef? What kind of food is served?
- *Give a balanced review.* Offer both positive and negative aspects of the restaurant and food. Be accurate, honest, but also respectful.
- *Be detailed.* Order a full meal: appetizer, entree, dessert, and a drink. Name the specific menu items you had. Listing and describing specifically what you ordered will help validate your opinions.
- *Be precise and descriptive.* Don't just say the food was good or bad. What made it good? Refer to the adjective list from the Discussion Board: Food Descriptions
- *Evaluate the entire experience.* How was the service? Comfort level of the ambience? Did the decor add/detract from the experience?
- *Connect to the reader/future diner.* Tell the reader why it's important to know what you ate. It could be because of the one spectacular dish, the extra late hours, the proximity to a famous site, etc. Sum up what the reader/future diner should remember.
- *Take photos* if possible. Food journalism articles are almost always accompanied by food photos, which

1. Expense for the restaurant review assignment was noted as part of the course description.

make for engaging, eye-catching, if more informative reading.

Submit:

Your newspaper restaurant review, 500-750 words

Your online open forum review, 150-300 words

Restaurant Review Template: include one for each time you go (3 total)

**Appendix B:**

**Restaurant Review Template**

<p><b>Restaurant Essentials</b> Name Type Location Hours When did you go?</p>	
<p><b>Menu</b> What is offered? Special deals? Special menus? Special diets? Cost range?</p>	
<p><b>Your order</b> What did you order? Describe what you ate. Think all 5 senses. Would you recommend it? Why or why not?</p>	
<p><b>Service</b> How was the service? Explain. How long did you have to wait?</p>	
<p><b>Atmosphere</b> Lighting Décor Noise Temperature</p>	
<p><b>Overall impression</b> How do you feel leaving? Would you go back? Why or why not? Would you recommend this restaurant? What type of person would enjoy this restaurant? And for what occasion?</p>	

### **Appendix C: Food Descriptions**

Being able to describe food and what it tastes like is a critical component to being a food writer. You have to paint a picture. Draw out the senses.

Below is a list of several ways to describe food based on Taste and Smell, Texture, Appearance, Sound, and Other.

Come up with three new adjectives per category for a total of 15 adjectives. Add directly to this list. Do not repeat your classmates. For inspiration, read reviews and find adjectives you like.

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