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# How to write a restaurant review

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Service difficult to stomach? Exquisite food but dreadful decor? **Chris Gower** of Eating Exeter shares his tips on being a culinary critic



**Blog Name:** Eating Exeter

[www.eatingexeter.co](http://www.eatingexeter.co)

**Blogger:** Chris Gower

**Age:** 34

**Started blogging:** 2002

**Based (area):** Exeter, Devon

**Monthly views:** 6,000+

**All time views:** 190,000+

**Blogging platform:** Wordpress

**Twitter handle:** @eatingexeter

**Instagram handle:** @eatingexeter

**Camera:** Nikon D3200/Canon 70D/  
4B7 Phone

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I started *Eating Exeter* in early 2011 with my friend Polly. When choosing places to eat in and around our city, we found that there were very few sources of well written reviews that we could trust. We found TripAdvisor unreliable and immensely subjective.

Seventy odd reviews and nearly five years later (and counting), the reviewing landscape has changed. Now there are two other awesome bloggers who review Exeter restaurants on their blogs and a blossoming foodie scene.

I was lucky enough to be a nominated Grand Finalist in the *Food Magazine Reader Awards* this year and, so far, the blog has attracted just over 190,000+ views in its lifetime.

Reviewing a restaurant is about telling a story, and everyone loves a good tale. You're not just writing about the food; the whole dining experience, from the moment you step through the door to the point you pay the bill, is important. As your blog posts will appear in Google searches, potential diners will use your blog as a source of reference; review enough restaurants and you might find that this becomes a new source of traffic itself. Solidifying your review style is a sure way to attract new readers and keep them coming back.



### Structure your review

If you were ever taught how to tell a story, then the classic 'Beginning - Middle - End' structure is the best to use when writing this type of content. You are telling a story after all.

**In the beginning** give context to the audience about why you've chosen that particular restaurant. Whether you were invited by the owner or you chose it specifically for your partner's birthday, or just randomly walked in. It's good to give the audience some idea why you chose that particular place to dine. This is often a good chance to name drop another blogger if it was a recommendation via a food blog that you subscribe to.

**The middle** is the meat of the review. This is where you tell your audience about the important elements of your experience.

**Service** - How was the service? Were they abrupt or impatient, or warm and attentive? The way you are treated as a diner can impact whether you enjoy the meal. I find apathetic service just as hard to stomach as rudeness - after all, you're paying money for the whole experience and not just the food.

**Price** - Make sure you tell readers how much items cost as this is often

the deciding factor in choosing a place to eat out. Do you think a restaurant is over-priced? If you do, make sure you take into account whether the restaurant has been recently refurbished, whether they consider themselves 'fine dining' and how they compare to other restaurants in the locale. Expensive restaurants are expensive for a reason, but is the price justified?

**Interior** - Might seem like a strange thing to mention but owners will often spend a vast amount on getting a restaurant to look and feel a certain way. The aesthetics can be as important to the experience as the food and the service.

**Atmosphere** - Is it noisy? Was the restaurant packed or deserted. A deserted restaurant on a Friday or Saturday night is normally a warning sign that it won't be open for much longer!

**Menu** - How is the menu put together? Are they using seasonal produce? Is the cuisine authentic? Also, note if the restaurant changes their menu regularly if it has been the same for time immemorial. A regularly changing menu can often indicate that the chef is changing it with the

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## don't be scared to take your DSLR

availability of fresh ingredients.

*Food* - Use varied adjectives, not just 'lovely' or 'nice' or 'delicious'. Think about the aroma and how the food makes you feel. Try and get the reader to salivate if the food is gorgeous or reel if the food was terrible. Describing the dish doesn't have to take up the whole review, but give it the spotlight it deserves.

**The end.** This is your time to summarise your review and give your overall opinion. If there was anything that really stood out about the experience, here is a good place to air it. Maybe it was the good service, or the epic drive to the middle of no where for an average carvery served by apathetic staff. Think about whether you'd recommend it to a friend, or even return yourself. It is up to you if you wanted to create a rating system, but I don't believe it is necessary. It does, however, give your audience an easy method of calculating their chances of having a good experience.

### **Don't Be Mean**

We've all had a disappointing dining experience, and some restaurants are better than others at dealing with problems. Always talk to the manager to resolve the big problem first. If you still go away fuming, try and transfer that feeling into objective analysis. Don't forget to write about the good parts of the meal; step back, sleep on it and then try again the next day and see what comes out.

If I've been out for a meal and it has been terrible, I will not write about it until the next day as a rule. I go through my notes and try to make sense of what happened and work out if anything was forgivable. If service is slow, is that because they were short staffed? If things went wrong, is that because they've only been open three days and many of the staff are still new? Sometimes little problems are easier to ignore than pick fault at. How much leeway you are willing to give is at your discretion.

### **Eye Candy**

For me, one of the big turn-offs for a review is naff photos. OK, you're not going to have studio quality photographs and there is only so much you can do whilst sitting at a table in a busy restaurant, but don't be scared to make the best of what you have and take LOTS of photos.

Often taking photos in restaurants can be a challenge due to low light; especially if the lighting is very mellow and warm. If you're taking it on your phone, make sure you run it through a decent photo editing app like VSCO or Snapseed before getting them on your Instagram account.

Don't be scared to take your DSLR. Many good makes of these can cope with low-light and if you're familiar with photo editing applications like Adobe Lightroom CC, then you can tweak your photos quite easily after the meal.



**Did I mention?**

Use your social media channels to maximise the coverage of your review after you've published it. Most good restaurants have some sort of social media presence, even if it is just a Facebook page. Restaurants will definitely want to see a positive review with some nice photos and if you get a repost or an RT from their account, then that means more exposure for you. ○



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**Regular reads:****Cheese & Biscuits**

<http://cheesenbiscuits.blogspot.com/>

Chris Pople is mostly based in London but reviews restaurants outside of the capital as well. His writing style has a dry wit that makes his reviews particularly entertaining and informative. Chris has established himself as one of London's top restaurant bloggers with many accolades to his name. He is considered one of five bloggers restaurants should fear by *Esquire UK* and one of *The Times* Top 10 Food Blogs amongst other things. When I first started *Eating Exeter*, he was – and still is – one of my main influences.

**Hamburger-Me**

<http://hamburger-me.com/>

This blog is about burgers and one man's journey across London and beyond reviewing them. Mr HM even visited Exeter to sample one of my favourite restaurants, Ruby Modern Diner. Being a burger fan, I can share his enthusiasm. He also has a video on his blog explaining how he judges burgers and the different elements that go into the process. There is a good use of photos, which help convey the delicious looking burgers that he regularly reviews.

**The Glasgow Food Geek**

<http://glasgowfoodgeek.co.uk/>

I first found Pam's blog when I was doing some research about something completely unrelated to blogging, and have enjoyed reading it ever since. She has such an engaging and lively style of writing, uses lots of photos and has a logical clear rating system. The blog also serves as a bit of a diary, too, and she has a 'My Week In Pictures' format which works really well.