

# The Poetry Of Yelp: How The Reviews Site Became A Massive Platform For Creativity

There are, truly, only two types of people in the world: those who write Yelp reviews and those who don't.

With a twinge of guilt, I must confess that I fall into the latter category: I regularly consult Yelp for advice about places to check out in my neighborhood, but I've never written a review myself. And yet, as I've scanned other people's posts over the years, I've often wondered what compels them to spend hours carefully crafting reviews. Are they more altruistic than I am? Are they more concerned with good service and high-quality food? Do they have more time on their hands?

It was with those questions in mind that I set out to examine the inner workings of the Yelp community. I quickly discovered that many people find reviewing an incredibly satisfying creative endeavor. The most prolific Yelp reviewers, in fact, treat their write-ups as a kind of art form, and approach them with care and pride. So, [the 26,380 reviews that are posted on Yelp every minute](#) can be arguably seen as a large-scale art project, not just a practical tool in modern life.

"For people whose jobs don't give them a platform for self-expression, Yelp is often treated as a creative outlet," [Camilla Vasquez](#), a linguistics professor who studies consumer reviews, tells me. "Yelp reviewers often feel a sense of ownership over their work. They enjoy the feeling that they are an author, that their voice matters and that they are being clever in their style." Her hypothesis is that since I am a writer by trade, I already have a creative outlet, so I don't need Yelp to fill that void.

For her recent scholarly book, *The Discourse of Online Consumer Reviews*, Vasquez analyzed thousands of reviews on TripAdvisor, Amazon, Netflix, Yelp, and Epicurious. She notes that each site has its own particular flavor, cultural

norms and rules of engagement. For instance, since film appreciation is so subjective, Netflix reviews often reflect individual tastes of the writer, while Amazon reviewers tends to focus on providing an objective evaluation of products. Of all of the sites, however, she found that Yelp is most likely to draw out reviewers' creativity. "Yelp has a very specific kind of ethos," she says. "It is the only site that asks readers to rate reviews on the basis of being not only useful but also funny and cool. That presupposes that reviewers are taking a specific kind of position as a writer: they are trying not only to be useful but also to be engaging and entertaining."

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When I spoke to active Yelp reviewers, I found that creativity figures into the reviewing process in many ways. For some, developing a unique perspective and translating an experience into words is a rare

opportunity for self-expression. This is the case for [Albert Wong](#), a 36-year-old software engineer who lives in Los Angeles. He has spent most of his life studiously avoiding anything resembling writing, focusing instead on math and science classes that would pave the path to a career in technology. "You should have seen my cursive in school—it was totally illegible," he says. But around 2008, Wong felt like his life was missing something. "I wanted to be a bit more creative in life," he says. "It occurred to me that even my emails—which were probably the most original things I was producing—were dry and boring."

Wong tells me that the reason he took the plunge and started writing Yelp reviews six years ago was to improve his command of written English. He points out that he is a native English speaker, who was born and raised in the United States, but he found Yelp to be the perfect platform to play with language in new ways. Wong is now a prolific writer of reviews. At the time of publication, he had posted 1,345 reviews on Yelp and the last four had popped up in the three days it took me to write this story. (A far cry from the 8,000 reviews produced by [Yelp's most](#)

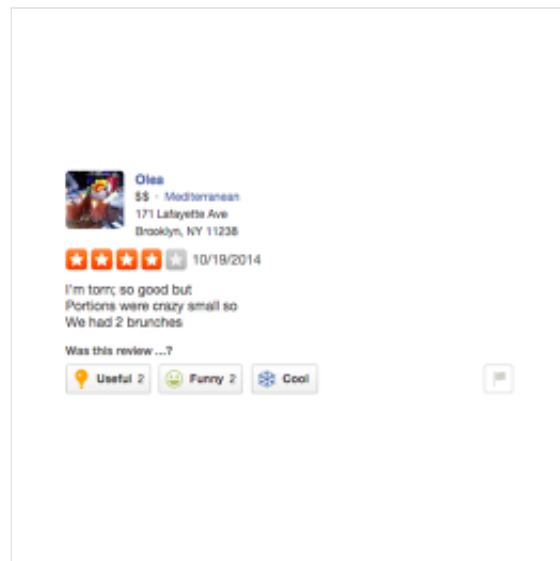
[productive reviewer](#), but an impressive tally nonetheless.) He makes it clear that his reviews are not motivated by altruism or a desire to help his community, but simply because he finds the process so enjoyable. "Yelp has always been more of a diary for me, rather than a way to contribute to society," he says.

Wong's job requires him to travel frequently, so he has made a bit of a game of checking out eclectic hidden gems in each city and writing about them on Yelp. Doing this requires him to process his experiences differently because he has to find an angle about each restaurant he visits and translate his experiences into succinct prose. Hearing him describe it, this approach sounds like an abbreviated version of what I do as a journalist.

Vasquez tells me that while reviews appear simple and straightforward, reviewers must still articulate their experiences in narrative form, much like journaling and storytelling.

Yelp, for its part, consciously thinks about ways to nurture their members' creative spark. "There are a few ways we try to encourage creativity when it comes to review writing," Yelp communications specialist, Hannah Cheesman, tells me. "We rely on the Yelp community to show us which reviews they like most by voting them useful, funny or cool." Yelp also highlights stellar reviews on its Review of the Day section and in a Weekly Yelp newsletter to encourage reviewers to produce their best work.

Wong has developed a distinct style. His language isn't flowery or funny: he gets to the point quickly, telling his reader whether it is worth the visit and what they should eat. Like all the other reviewers I spoke with, Wong tends to give mostly high marks to establishments - the majority of his reviews are between three and five stars, and a restaurant needs to seriously screw up to a lower rating. ([66% of ratings](#)



on Yelp are four or five stars.) Instead, his reviews tend to provide tips or insights that would not otherwise be obvious. Take [his review of Pasadena's Lucky Boy Drive-In](#), which he gave four stars. "I came, I saw and I got the breakfast burrito," he writes. "Yeah, it's good, but is it the best? Nope. Still, it's an institution."

Yelp users—[78% of whom](#) have a college or graduate school degree—tend to have strong opinions about what kind of reviews tickle their fancy. Shortly after he began flooding Yelp with his reviews, Wong discovered he had quite a fan base on Yelp who kept tabs on his recommendations and complimented him on his writing style. ("You're my hero!" says Michelle K.; "Good writer," says Norman H.) Wong has a captive audience interested in the content he is producing, which is every author's dream. "I wouldn't call them groupies," he says, with a laugh, "but there are people who care about what I think about things. There are restaurants I go to where people recognize my face based on the reviews I have written. I'm still shocked that people would find value in what I write."

David Garcia, a 32-year-old content specialist in San Francisco, is another Yelp reviewer with a loyal following. Unlike Wong, however, Garcia appeals to his readers by elevating the simple review into elaborate works of creative writing, usually with a magic-realism flair. He's been on Yelp since 2006, but about three years into writing reviews, he started getting messages from complete strangers saying how much they appreciated his style. "I've always been into comedy writing," he tells me. "But when I started receiving validation for my writing from people I did not know, I started thinking of using this more as a mini publishing platform."

"I am always treading the line between what people would find acceptable."

While Wong consistently devotes half an hour a week to writing several short reviews, Garcia focuses on quality rather than quantity, spending a lot of time on each review, developing characters and plots. In his [recent review of Cheese Plus](#), a

San Francisco shop he gave a five-star review, Garcia writes a story about two people who stare into the moon and speak out an ancient incantation to summon a powerful but nefarious cheese-loving villain. By tempting the villain with scrumptious cheese from Cheese Plus, the two heroes are able to kill the evil cheese-lover and end the day with a well-deserved cheese sandwich.

Garcia points out that Yelp has organically developed cultural norms about what goes into a review. Typical reviews are shorter, contain a series of common evaluative words ("good," "cool," "not great") and generally abide by good grammar. "As a user of the site, you're now experiencing diminishing returns because reviews have become so formulaic," he says. His goal is stand out from the crowd, but not deviate too far from the norms that his work is no longer considered a review. "I am always treading the line between what people would find acceptable," he says. "It's fun to take two distinct things—comedy and reviewing—and force them together. The limitations on what you're able to do presents bigger challenges, which pushes you to be creative in new ways." Garcia's reviews are always based on real locations, even though the storytelling sometimes takes bizarre turns like visits to other dimensions or time travel. In some ways, his reviews are tributes to shops or restaurants that he likes. The owner of Cole Hardware thought Garcia's [review of his shop](#) was so funny that he is including it in his company's newsletter.

These weird and whacky reviews don't particularly bother the Yelp as a company, as long as they are not disruptive. "We encourage our community members to contribute useful reviews that are truthful and based on firsthand experiences," Yelp's Cheesman tells me. "As long as a review fits that criteria, Yelpers can get as creative as they want. In fact, a lot of users view Yelp as a lifestyle blog: everybody's writing style is a bit different."

Garcia was recently contacted by a movie producer, Dana Merwin, who is interested in using his reviews in a series of plays she is writing. But he's by no means the only

reviewer who is pushing the boundaries of the traditional review. Hundreds of other Yelp members are taking a stab at trying new approaches. (One guy, in fact, [supposedly scored a book deal](#) after a particularly riveting Yelp restaurant review, though further news of the book has proven elusive.) Chase C. is [chronicling his love life](#) through Yelp reviews. Farzan K. used punctuation marks to create [a cartoon strip about an unfortunate experience at McDonald's](#). There is also an entire genre of Yelp reviews entirely in Haiku form. A user who goes by the name of [Haiku F.](#) writes all his reviews in verse, such as this one for the Brooklyn restaurant Olea:

I'm torn; so good but  
Portions were crazy small so  
We had 2 brunches

Camilla Vasquez, the linguistics professor, says creative expression is only one, albeit powerful, driving force for Yelp reviewers. "Some people are motivated by a sense of altruism and a desire to help others," she says. "They don't want others to make their same mistakes and they want to offer useful insider tips. And, of course there are also people who want a forum to vent about an unsatisfying experience they have had: Yelp can be a catharsis for them."

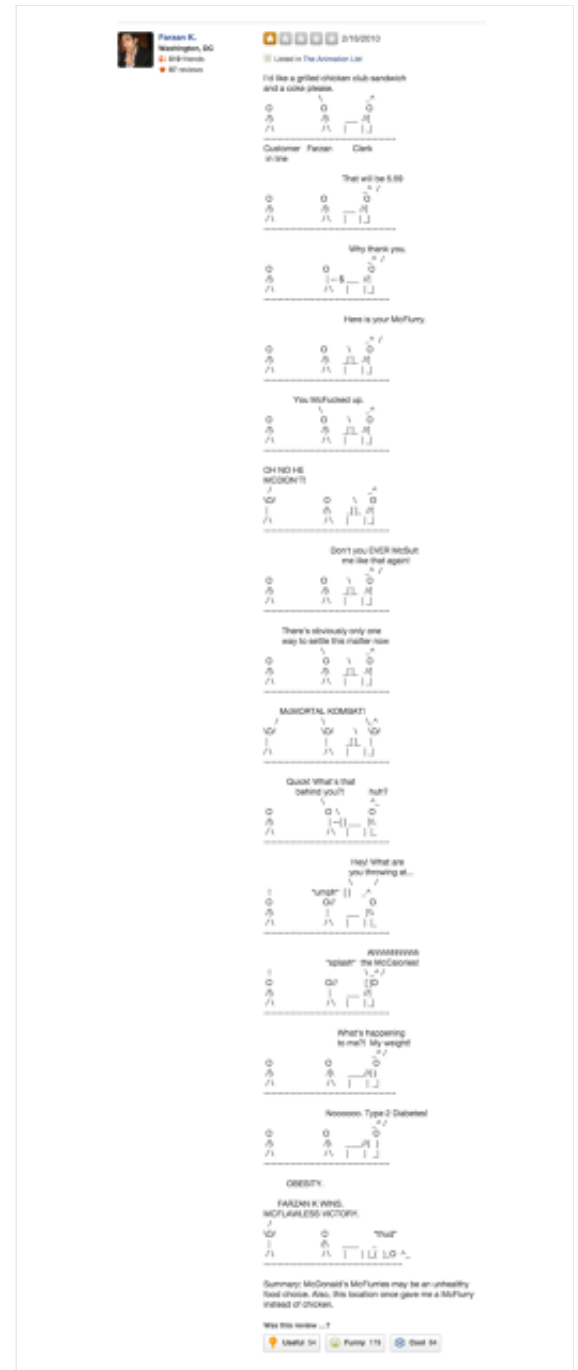
Katie Woodhull, a 27-year-old math teacher in New Jersey, for instance, is not primarily driven by the art of it all, but by altruism. Last year, she made a commitment to start writing Yelp reviews because she didn't want to benefit from the service without also contributing.

"It was my attempt to pay it forward," she tells me. "I'd used Yelp so frequently to help me find places to go to dinner or a happy hour when I arrived in my current town and I wanted to give back to the Yelp community." But she says that once she got started, she couldn't stop and became an avid user of the site, searching for new restaurants to add to her bucket list.

It didn't hurt that she eventually became part of the Yelp Elite, a privileged group of Yelp users who get to attend parties and dinners at new local establishments. To be considered for Elite membership, you need to be referred by another Elite and according to those I spoke to, you are judged on the quality of your reviews rather than the sheer number of you have written. An almighty-sounding body called the Yelp Elite Council is responsible for deciding whether Elites deserve to have their membership renewed every year, which ensures that members work hard to maintain their status. Vasquez says that being conferred Elite status comes with many benefits, besides the free meals. "Elites get to enjoy feeling like they are experts at something," she says. "It is a badge that allows them to be seen as credible."

Over the last two years, Yelp has been faced with [several lawsuits](#) from prolific reviewers who feel that they should be paid for the content they are producing for the site which Yelp is profiting from. (Yelp has dismissed these suits as frivolous.) But among the reviewers that I spoke to, there did not seem to be any negative feelings about the site.

They tell me it provides them with a platform to share their knowledge and expertise, write in creative new ways, and feel like they are contributing to their community. It's enough to convince even someone like me to try my hand at writing a review.



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So after finally getting a reservation at a popular Turkish restaurant in my neighborhood, I am happy to say that I produced my first piece of Yelp art—a Haiku poem about my experience:

Hair in the veggies

Really got me bummed out dude

Other food super.