



# How to Review a Beer

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There was a serious lack of information on reviewing beers—especially for the average beer drinking consumer—when I first wrote "How to Review a Beer" back in 2005. A decade or so later, I felt the topic needed to be revisited given the rise of casual raters, tickers and our recent refocusing on our roots: reviewing beers.

## The Goal

BeerAdvocate is a consumer-based website; as such, subjectivity comes into play. With that in mind, the following aims to bring some objectivity to consumer-based beer evaluations by using BeerAdvocate's rating system and encouraging a more thoughtful approach to rating and reviewing beers.

## How to Review a Beer

Many see reviewing as an unnecessary process best left to geeks, however, documenting your experience will help you to learn more about beer, train your palate, and broaden your beer vocabulary. Sharing your experience will help others learn, too.

First, let's start with the core beer rating system. Inspired by several professional beer judging scoring systems, a user's beer rating is comprised of five ratable attributes. Each is given a point value on a 1–5 point scale with 0.25 increments, and then the final user rating is calculated using our weighted rating system, wherein certain attributes are applied with more importance.

4.50 - 5.00 = World-Class

4.00 - 4.49 = Outstanding

3.75 - 3.99 = Very Good

3.50 - 3.74 = Good

3.00 - 3.49 = Okay

2.00 - 2.99 = Poor

1.00 - 1.99 = Awful

## Appearance (Look) = 6%





Examples:



- Pale, golden, amber, ruby, brown, black
- Clear, hazy, cloudy, turbid
- Lackluster, lively, inviting, foamy, creamy

Pro tips:

- Often thought to be unimportant, appearance sets expectations and is frequently a sign of good or bad things to come.
- Pour the beer into a clean glass and raise it to eye level for better viewing.

### Smell = 24%

Describe any malt, hops, yeast and other aromatics.

Examples:

- Malts: sweet, roasty, smoky, toasty, nutty, chocolate, toffee, caramel, biscuit, bread
- Hops: dank, resiny, herbal, perfumy, spicy, leafy, grassy, floral, piney, citrusy, grapefruit, citrus rinds
- Alcohol: boozy, spicy, peppery
- Yeast also creates aromas:
  - Ales: fruity or flowery esters, spicy or peppery phenols
  - Lagers: clean, allowing the malt and hop subtleties to pull through
  - Wild Yeast/Bacteria: funk, barnyard, horse blanket, medicinal, band-aids, diapers

Pro tips:

- 90–95% of what you experience is through your sense of smell.
- Breathe through your nose, then with your mouth open, and finally through your mouth only; the nose and mouth are connected in the experience. This process is called olfaction.
- Agitate your beer by gently swirling it in the glass. This will pull out aromas, slight nuances in fragrance, loosen and stimulate carbonation, and test head retention.

### Taste = 40%

Describe any malt, hops, fermentation byproducts, balance, finish or aftertaste and other flavor characteristics.

Examples:

- Flavor descriptions will often be similar to smell, which is expected.
- How well does it fit the style guidelines?
- Is it balanced, or was there a specific dominating ingredient or flavor?

Pro tips:

- Do any of the flavors remind you of a specific food or thing? Note it.
- Sip, let it warm and wander on the palate, swallow, and then breathe out. This process of exhaling is called retro-olfaction and will release retained stimulations at the mucus and mouthfeel level but at a higher temperature. The nuances will often be the same as those





• Really cold beer tends to mask flavors. Try tasting the beer after it warms up a bit, which will allow more flavors to emerge and become more pronounced.



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### **Mouthfeel (Feel) = 10%**

Describe the beer's body, carbonation, warmth, creaminess, astringency and other palate sensations.

Examples:

- Flat, seltzer-like, crisp, over-carbonated
- Light, heavy, chewy, oily, thin, watery, smooth, raw, coarse

Pro tips:

- Take another sip and let it wander, focusing on the beer's texture on your palate.

### **Overall = 20%**

Describe your overall impression of the beer.

Examples:

- How was the overall drinking experience?
- What did you find pleasurable or objectionable about it?
- Offer suggestions for improvement.

Pro tips:

- Be honest and constructive.

### **[ Other Considerations ]**

#### **Respect Beer. And Brewers.**

Behind each beer is a person with feelings and pride. Brewing might be their passion, livelihood, or entire life. Even if you don't like a beer, at the very least have some respect and be constructive with your criticism.

#### **Scoring All Ones or Fives**

Rating a beer with all ones (no redeeming qualities) or fives (no room for improvement) should be rare. It can be a sign of someone abusing the rating system, too, so consider writing a review to back up your unusually low or high rating.

#### **Form Your Own Opinion**

It's important to not be influenced by others when reviewing. Everyone is going to have a different experience, so make sure the opinions you express are in fact your own. Don't allow others to influence you before you review the beer yourself.

#### **Keep Style in Mind**

We don't expect everyone to judge like a pro, but keeping the beer's style in mind will help you approach each beer a bit more objectively.





- Check out BeerAdvocate's [Beer Styles](#). They're not perfect and need an overhaul, but it's a good place to start.
- Review with an open mind. Judge the beer for what it's trying to be, not what you think the beer should be; like that that kick-ass India Pale Ale that you just finished drinking.
- Don't review styles that you know you don't like. Your opinion will be tainted, and it's not fair to the brewery. A beery characteristic that you might not like could be due to style and shouldn't be deemed a flaw. Examples:
  - Buttery notes (diacetyl) in a Scotch Ale
  - Sourness in a Lambic
  - Intense smokiness in a Rauchbier
- Check out the [Beer Judge Certification Program \(BJCP\)](#) and [Brewers Association](#) beer style guidelines, which are used by judges at homebrew and professional competitions.

### Temperature

Many people drink their beer too damn cold. Cold temperatures will numb the taste buds and literally mask the beer's true flavors, aromas and nuances. Use color (malts) and alcohol content to determine the best drinking temperatures. Try around 40–50 degrees F for paler or lower alcohol beers, and 50–60 degrees F for darker or higher alcohol beers.

### Glassware

It's important to use a clean glass when reviewing. The type of glass will also impact your entire experience. Check out: [Glassware for Beer](#).

### Tasting Order

Many suggest that beers should be tasted by following the old "lightest to darkest" heuristic method. While this generally works, today it's a dated and flawed approach. Sure, malt flavors will intensify with increasing kilning temperatures, but oftentimes color has nothing to do with tasting a beer. Color can be an indication of what you might be in for, but for the most part, and with most drinkers, it's psychological. Instead, you'll want to consider two things: alcohol by volume (ABV) and International Bittering Units (IBU). Save your high alcohol and hoppy beers towards the end so you don't ruin your palate early into the tasting.

Exceptions to this might be certain specialty ingredients that have very bold and distinct characters, like smoked malts, intense fruits, or wild yeast and bacteria; all of which can be found in lighter colored beers; hence the flaw. You'll want to save these for the end as well.

### Cleanse Your Palate

It's highly recommended that you have water and plain bread or crackers on hand to cleanse the palate between beers. Avoid salty and greasy foods or anything that could overpower the senses—you want to clean and scrub the palate, not destroy it.

### [ Suggested Don'ts ]

#### Don't Smoke

Smoking inhibits your sense of smell and taste in a major way. First- and second-hand smoking will temporarily, and eventually permanently, damage your senses.





outside of the brewer's control. If you come across a beer like this, alert whoever you purchased it from and send a note to the brewer. Using a review to bitch about it won't help anyone.

### Don't Review from Memory

You don't need to review every single beer that you drink. But if you feel compelled to, take some notes instead of attempting to recall a beer experience from days, weeks, months, or years ago.

### Don't Review Samplers or at Beer Fests

If you're planning on taking notes at a beer fest, don't. With their small pours (sometimes just an ounce or two), loud environments and ambient smells, not to mention tasting numerous beers in a short period of time, beer fests are not the ideal environment for fairly evaluating beers.

Along the same lines as beer fests, many breweries and bars offer 2-4 ounce samplers. You're not going to get to know a beer off of a sample, so don't try.

### Don't Review If Your Senses Are Shot

Flavor and aroma are intertwined. If you're sick or suffering from palate fatigue, you might want to hold off on that review.

### Don't Review While Intoxicated

Your judgment will be clouded, as will your senses.

### Don't Be Intimidated

The information above is a lot to drink in. Don't worry about it. Have a beer, and relax. No one is expecting you to be an expert or write a novella about a beer. (Although it's been done.) Just like drinking beer, sharing your beer experiences is meant to be fun.

### [ Acknowledgements ]

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- @Jason for his input over the years.

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