

## Writing about Film

From movie reviews, to film history, to criticism, to technical analysis of cinematic technique, writing is one of the best ways to respond to film. Writing about film enhances your enjoyment of film, as in the writing process you will have the opportunity to think carefully, assess critically, and discover new dimensions that might otherwise remain unappreciated. Remember that though a film may have dialogue and narration, the basic “language” of film is a succession of visual images, and the way they are edited is the “grammar” of cinema.

Each writer may have an individualized approach to responding to and writing about a film, but all writers will work more effectively if they prepare to view the film and to write about it. Therefore, aim to:

- Investigate background information on the film you are writing about, such as the film’s historical, cultural, and stylistic contexts, or production history. This kind of background material can prove to be useful in your written analysis, critique, evaluation, and general understanding of the film because even if your assignment does not ask you, for example, to explicitly write about the film in relation to the era in which it was made, knowing that history will deepen your critical awareness of other aspects of the film, such as the iconography of propagandistic imagery in the films made during World War II. Examining the film as a process that has been shaped by different types of events—historical, contemporary, and individual—can guide you to ideas of your own about the film.
- Explore the individual and collaborative factors that affected the film’s final form so you can better understand the aesthetic and cinematic decisions the director made. The conclusive images you view on screen come from an extended creative process, involving such factors as the notable influences of directors, screenwriters, and cinematographers, as well as the relevant existing conditions during the making of the film (these could include financing, casting, weather, illness, etc.).
- Find out who the film’s director is and what other films s/he has made. By viewing some of the director’s other films, you will have a better understanding of the film you are writing about because you are developing a larger picture of the themes that inspired the director, the genres and techniques s/he preferred, the consistency or change in cinematic storytelling and method over the course of her/his career.
- Be selective in your approach to elements of film composition, as production includes everything from lighting, to sound, to wardrobe, to editing, to special effects. The more specific the focus, the more closely you can analyze and examine your chosen area of investigation and relate your analysis to a thesis about that aspect of the film or your opinion of the work as a whole.

- Think comprehensively about the film’s story and characters. Cinematic images do not merely represent a single dimension of a subject, such as just the story or just the characters. All feature films tell stories, but the way the narratives and their protagonists are presented to us vary greatly in style, tone, technique, etc., from film to film, filmmaker to filmmaker. Film analysis is concerned with how these elements help tell the story and create the characters.
- Watch films with critical awareness as you would actively read and annotate a book you were preparing to write about; make note of the striking features and ask questions. After an initial viewing, if possible, watch the film a second time, taking notes, letting your general preliminary questions evolve into more specific ones. Note, too, that doing research beforehand can play a significant role in freeing you to experience the film with purposeful observation and informed note-taking. If you are writing about a film that you can only view once, this groundwork will be essential to the success of your paper.
- Guide yourself to a focused topic through your questions, and continue to narrow your approach as you decide which questions can be grouped together under a shared idea, perhaps involving the theme of the film, the characters, or its technical and formal features.

Keep in mind that this handout is a guideline. Check with your instructor on any questions you may have concerning your assignment.

## **DEVELOPING A THESIS STATEMENT**

Most academic essays seek to persuade readers to understand a specific issue in a specific way—the writer’s way. The writer’s thesis statement offers this substantial but concise assertion (usually in one to two sentences in the introduction or near the beginning of the essay), thereby providing the essay’s argument with its judgmental focus.

Perhaps, though, in writing about film you might want to offer a well thought-out central idea rather than an obvious point of contention. For example, a comparison/contrast of the defining cinematic elements of the French Nouvelle Vague movement with those dictated by the principles of the Dogme 95 manifesto is a substantial central idea on which to build an effective essay. Of course, you would have to fully elaborate on that relationship, providing examples.

The difference between a central idea and a thesis statement is in their degree of contention. The above example of a central idea could be debatable, but disagreement would arise only if the writer does not adequately explain and illustrate the points of comparison and contrast. However, in a thesis statement—such as “The French New Wave was a more radical break from bourgeois filmmaking than Dogme 95”—it is certainly more obvious that readers will either disagree or agree, by the very nature of the claim itself. Moreover, even if the writer advances a stimulating argument with great evidence in development of the thesis, because the claim is confrontational, a reader may still oppose it.

## USING SOURCES

A good research paper often includes evidence from both **primary** and **secondary sources**. Whether you use primary or secondary sources, remember to explain and analyze the passages that you have chosen and what those passages mean in relation to your argument. You must also prepare your reader before using passages (direct or paraphrased) by providing at least a brief background.

### Primary Sources

Primary sources refer to the original materials (not what another author says about them). Therefore, in the case of film, primary sources will be, for example, the films themselves, screenplays, and interviews with those involved in the making of the work(s).

### Secondary Sources

Interpreting and commenting on primary sources, secondary sources include books and articles. These texts are extremely helpful as they deepen our knowledge of film and inform us of the many critical approaches that scholars and other specialists in the field have taken. Even though these sources are of great value, an essay on film is usually not comprised entirely of secondary sources.

### Documentation

You will be required to document all of your sources, including ideas, paraphrases, quotations, and references to a complete text. There are style manuals, such as the *MLA (Modern Language Association) Handbook* and *The Chicago Manual of Style*, that provide guidelines for documentation, but each academic discipline has its own preference. Always check with your instructor to find out which style is preferred.

## CRITICAL APPROACHES TO FILM CRITIQUES

### Film History

All films can be considered part of a culture's history, either emerging from or influencing historical events. Examples of this approach are analyzing a film in the context of important historical events surrounding it (for example, films made in the United States during World War II); comparing and contrasting films from two different eras (for example, French films of the 1930s and films of the Nouvelle Vague in the 1960s); exploring the connection between movies and their critical and/or public reception in different eras; and focusing on movies made in the studio system.

## National Cinemas

This approach investigates and discusses films in terms of their cultural or national character. The premise behind this approach is that different film cultures emerge with different characteristics in different nations, and, therefore, one must determine the social, cultural, and political conditions that characterize the culture and how these conditions manifest themselves in what is portrayed on screen.

## Genres

Genre is a means of classifying films in terms of similar themes, characters, narrative structures, and camera techniques in categories such as Westerns, musicals, film noir, melodramas, and sci-fi. Be attentive to themes and stylistic techniques that are common to a particular genre, and consider their particular use and purpose in individual films.

## The Auteur Theory

One of the most common forms of film criticism found in cinema magazines and film reviews is based on the hypothesis that a film is the product of a single filmmaker's imagination and talent. As a critical method, focus on the auteur calls for analyzing her/his unifying vision, characteristic style, and sensibility as evidenced in a film or an oeuvre.

## Formalism

This type of film criticism emphasizes formal matters of structure and composition, such as narrative openings and closings, repetition and variation of camera techniques, and shot sequences. A formal analysis breaks down the film into separate parts and examines how these parts contribute to the film as a whole. Whether you are examining a single shot or a series of images, identify the telling and significant formal features and explain how they communicate the story and themes.

## Ideology

From an ideological perspective, any cultural creation or product arises from and contributes to a system of ideas on how the world is or should be seen and how people in this world should or do see each other within it. In analytical writing with this approach, begin by identifying what you determine to be the message or messages the film aims to convey about the world. Ideological criticism avoids limiting itself to the content or obvious politics of a film; instead, sophisticated ideological criticism analyzes a film's formal elements to see if they support or undermine any stated or apparent message.

**Note:** Assignments often combine several of these topics; for example, an essay on Alfred Hitchcock may discuss him as an auteur working in the genre of the suspense thriller, or a paper on Sergei Eisenstein is likely to consider his place in film history and

the ideological aspect of his films. Almost all serious writing about film will include formal analysis.