

Unraveling the Mystery of Film Writing



1. **There is no mystery!** Film writing is very similar to analytical literature essays, but there are a few key differences:
 - a. Work with evidence that is solely visual images, not textual.
 - b. Analyze narrative in terms of cinematography (camera angles, shots, editing, colors, movement, etc) instead of figurative language.
 - c. Additionally, be aware of the use of auditory cues, such as music, sound effects, and dialogue and consider the purpose of their use.

2. Most students will be asked to write the **Critical Essay**. The film writer strives to:
 - a. Convince the reader of a film's value, be it artistic, technological, economical
 - b. Connect thematic or structural elements of a film to the personal, social, and cultural environment from which it developed

Things to Remember:

- ✓ Avoid lapsing into a synopsis of the films. Plot summary does not equal analysis!
- ✓ Detail is crucial to describe the visual medium of film writing, but be careful not to include too much. Always keep in mind how each detail furthers your paper and helps prove your thesis.
- ✓ Focus on your own opinions of the films.
- ✓ Ask, "How do we know this?" – be clear and specific in stating your explicit evidence.
- ✓ Don't be intimidated by jargon, but also avoid overuse (for assistance, see "Resources").
- ✓ Don't forget the common problems of any argumentative paper, including:
 - **Thesis:** clear, plausible, insightful, and easily identifiable. Be sure to answer the assignment and push beyond a topic to ask "Why?" the topic is relevant.
 - **Structure:** Choose a layout that is appropriate for the thesis and connect with strong transitions; ensure that this structure maintains a focused argument.
 - **Use of Evidence:** Use information from the primary source (scenes, portions of the dialogue, explicit images, sounds, and other cinematography) to support your argument
 - **Logic and Argumentation:** Ensure that ideas are connected and flow logically; the argument should be clear, focused, and reasonable.
 - **Mechanics:** Sentence structure (this is one of the major issues!), grammar, and diction

Additional Comments for Tutors:

- Effective student film writing should avoid the extremes of summarization and criticism (exemplified by a movie review or a theoretical essay). The critical essay falls between these two forms; look for elements of both forms of film writing in the student's essay.
- Film writers might use a kind of language and imagery that is different from what you're used to, in order to efficiently describe evidence of motion, light, and sound.
- For the most part, film writing abides by standard writing conventions that might be found in any analytical paper. Be sure to check with the student about specifics of the assignment or the instructor's expectations. Different instructors expect different types of analysis of images and varying degrees of the use of technical terms.
- Sample assignments might include: analyze the narrative, compare/contrast elements in a movie, questions about genre and what makes a genre work.

List of Resources for Students for Film Writing:

A Short Guide to Writing About Film by Timothy Corrigan

Introduction to Film Criticism by Tim Bywater and Thomas Sobchack

Film Writing and Selected Journalism by James Agee

Film/Genre by Rick Altman

Dictionary of Film Terms by Frank Beaver

Multimedia center in Rush Rhees

- www.lib.rochester.edu/mmc/

Richard and Ronay Menschel Library at the George Eastman House

- www.eastmanhouse.org/inc/collections/library.php

University of Rochester Film Studies Department

- www.fms.rochester.edu/

Other Sources Used in The Making of This Guide:

"The Film-Within-A-Film as Special Effect for Special Affect" by Rebecca Gordon

Interview with Film Student, Writer, and Director Julian Klepper, 2006

Interview with Film Professor George Grella, 1 March 2007

Interview with Film Professor Joanne Bernardi, 7 March 2007

Writing on Film: A Short Guide for Peer-Tutors

When a student approaches you with an essay on film, consider the following comments on film writing, derived from "A Short Guide to Writing About Film" by Timothy Corrigan.

Most film writing aspires to one of two aims, persuasion or exploration. The persuasive film writer strives to convince the reader of a film's value, be it artistic, technological, economical. The exploratory film writer seeks to connect thematic or structural elements of a film to the personal, social, and cultural environment from which it developed. Corrigan outlines three dominant forms of film writing that employ varying amounts of persuasion and exploration:

- The Movie Review
 - mostly persuasive
 - newspapers or magazines
 - descriptive, audience assumed ignorant
 - narrow implications, broad audience
- The Theoretical Essay
 - mostly exploratory
 - journals or books
 - little description, audience assumed knowledgeable
 - broad implications, narrow audience
- The Critical Essay
 - synthesis of movie review and theoretical essay
 - most student writing falls into this category
 - audience assumed familiar with film, but not with its broader implications

Often film instructors expect students to write critical essays, which combine the goals of the movie review and the theoretical essay. Therefore, effective student film writing should avoid the extremes of summarization and criticism, exemplified by the movie review and the theoretical essay. Look for elements of both of these film writing forms in the student's essay.

Although the film writing utilizes unique descriptive language and theoretical approaches, in many ways it resembles writing about literature. Keep this in mind as you read the student's paper. If you become confused at any point, then ask the student the meaning of a term or the gist of a theoretical standpoint. If they truly understand their topic, they should be able to provide a clear answer to your question. Other than that, expect normal writing conventions. The instructor should determine specific expectations, such as the paper's citation style and format. Good luck!

Short Guide to Research about Film:

Film might be especially difficult to research. Information about old or obscure films may be hard to find. Some local resources include:

Multimedia center in Rush Rhees

- www.lib.rochester.edu/mmc/

Richard and Ronay Menschel Library at the George Eastman House

- www.eastmanhouse.org/inc/collections/library.php

University of Rochester Film Studies Department

- www.fms.rochester.edu/

Important Note:

Watch for “buff biographies” in film. These are usually books about famous entertainers written based on rumors or unverified information. One way to identify these sources is that there will be no footnotes or bibliographic information.

Special Features of Film Writing:

Film writers face a special challenges when writing about film. They have to discuss film which by nature contains large amounts of visual imagery. Therefore, writing about film can be an especially tedious process. As U of R film student Julius Klepper says, “When writing a critical paper about a film I usually have to watch it ten or fifteen times.”

Film is a media that appeals to senses of motion, light, and sound. Trying to accurately convey film on paper would be impossible. One must make compromises while writing about film. As a writing fellow you can expect a different kind of imagery and language that will be used to try to efficiently describe visual information. One way to help a student determine whether they are summarizing too much or too little is to ask them how the detail they give supports their thesis. If they are writing a critical paper, most of the time, it is assumed that the audience is knowledgeable of the film. Therefore, descriptive detail should serve a purpose.

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- Film Writing and Selected Journalism by James Agee

Other Sources Used in The Making of This Guide:

- “The Film-Within-A-Film as Special Effect for Special Affect” by Rebecca Gordon
- Interview with Film Student, Writer, and Director Julian Klepper