



NO. 36 IN THE WRITING CENTER HANDOUT SERIES

Lights...Camera...Brainstorming: Writing About Films

Yes! Our professor is letting us watch a movie for class. This is going to be so easy; I love movies, especially the popcorn. Wait...I have to write about it? D'oh! How can I write a five-page paper on a two-hour movie?

You don't have to be a film major or a cinema expert to write about film. The process can be very similar to writing about literature, but writing about film requires analyzing elements of film, such as lighting, editing, and camera angles. All you have to do is think about the *total experience*. Here are some pointers.

The importance of scenes.

Films are made of scenes, which include not only dialogue, but also a myriad of technical elements. So, you should consider entire scenes while watching a movie rather than just focusing on plot or dialogue. How did the lighting set the mood? How did a casting choice change the way a character was portrayed? How did the music foreshadow the plot? Most important, how does the camera tell the story? Then, when you begin writing your paper, think of how an entire scene contributes to your thesis, with reference to the technical and the more literary elements alike.

Before you watch the movie.

- Why are you watching the movie? The purpose behind the assignment will affect how you watch the movie and, eventually, how you structure your paper.
 - ◆ If the instructor wants you to consider the movie within a social context, you should pay attention to major themes and potential messages.
 - ◆ If the instructor wants you to compare and contrast the movie to a book, then you should focus on the similarities and differences in plot, subject matter, characterization, and theme.
 - ◆ If your instructor wants you to analyze the movie as a whole, you will have to think about plot, lighting, and all other factors that go into filmmaking.
- Do a little research on the film. Movie reviews written by professional critics are a good start because they give you an idea of what to look for. Once you know the reason why critics hated or loved it, you can look for that aspect of the movie when you watch it. The Internet Movie Database (www.imdb.com) is one reliable source with information about the director, actors, crew, and a short synopsis.
- Get ready to take notes — the more you take, the more material you will have for later.

While watching the movie.

- Remember that film is a unique form of expression, integrating visual and auditory media. Do not get so caught up in the plot that you forget to notice the technical elements. Pay close attention to music, lighting, camera movement, editing, and casting of characters. For example, how does music contribute to the shower scene in *Psycho*? How does the camera help portray relationships in *Sunset Boulevard*?
- Try to watch the movie more than once to notice certain scenes or quotations that you may have missed the first time around.

(continued on reverse)



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After the movie.

- Put the film in context. When was it made? In what time period does the action of the film take place? How does its context affect its story?
- Define major issues and examine how, or whether, they are resolved.
- Remember that the instructor wants your opinion of the movie based on analysis, not just on “gut” reactions.

Writing the paper.

- Just as in a literature analysis, you should introduce a concrete, arguable thesis in the beginning and prove it throughout your paper. For example, your thesis could address one of the major themes and how the director expresses it.
- Sometimes the instructor will ask for a short synopsis of the film in your introduction, but in general, avoid plot summary. Only talk about the scenes that prove your thesis.

For more information on writing film papers, see

<http://www.dartmouth.edu/%7ecompose/student/humanities/film.html>

The St. Martin's Handbook (5th ed): 900

A Short Guide to Writing about Film (4th ed), Timothy

Corrigan