

**WRITING ASSIGNMENTS**  
FST 377 AMERICAN CINEMA SINCE 1961

PROFESSOR TODD BERLINER

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**General Instructions for Writing Assignments**

Cite all of your sources. Failure to cite sources is plagiarism, the worst form of academic corruption.

Prepare your papers and bibliographies using MLA format. See the MLA Style Guide on the Blackboard page for this course. There you will also find sample outlines, bibliographies, and research papers—exemplary work written by students in previous courses.

Submit your written work as email attachments (MS Word documents only). The title of your documents should start with your last name (e.g. “yourlastname\_outline.doc”). I will comment on your work using the “track changes” feature in MS Word and email the document back to you. Do not paste your work in the body of your email. Double space everything.

**Some Hortatory Advice about Writing About Movies**

- Write something about movies that could not also be said about movie plot summaries. Don't write about what movies are about: Write about movies *as* movies.
- Be sure to ask yourself the most urgent of all academic questions: *So what?* Or, to put the question more delicately, *Who would want to read what I'm writing?*
- I care about the specificity of your ideas, the precision and vividness of your analyses, the originality and ambitiousness of your project, and, in particular, the clarity and validity of your thinking and prose.
- Above all, tell the truth. Don't say anything you don't believe. Don't say anything you don't understand. Don't hunt for “the answer.” Look at the truth and don't assume it will be either exciting or nugget-like or important or similar to the kinds of things you are used to finding (or putting) in artworks when you study them. The truth is usually good enough and always better than its alternative.

**CRITICAL RECEPTION REPORT**

Locate several reviews (at least seven) of an American film made between 1961 and 1980, and write a report that summarizes the critical reception of the film at the time of its release. Pick any American film, that you yourself have seen, made within those 20 years. Write a brief essay (2 pages tops) that explains how film reviewers responded to the film immediately after it was released theatrically.

For help finding reviews, consult the reference librarians in Randall library. You might start with the *Film & Television Literature Index*, one of Randall Library's electronic databases.

Don't organize your report review-by-review. Instead, organize *point-by-point*: Explain the main issues that reviewers remarked on, citing individual reviewers as support. What did reviewers agree or disagree about?

You may turn in late your Critical Reception Report. Any excuse for lateness will be accepted, no matter how improbable, up to one week past the due date; however, late work will receive no written comments from me (there is no other penalty), and I'll give you verbal comments if you bring your paper to my office hours. After a week, your paper loses 2% points for every hour it is late.

Provide a “Works Cited” page, in MLA format, of all of the reviews you reported on.

- Checklist:  At least seven reviews, all written within six months of the film's initial release  
 Works Cited page in MLA format (including date of the initial review)  
 Email as MS Word attachment (title starts with your last name).

## RESEARCH PROJECT

Over a period of about eight weeks, students will complete the following assignments:

- A. Individual Conference with Professor Berliner;
- B. Detailed Outline and Bibliography; and
- C. Abstract, Final Paper, and List of Works Cited.

You may collaborate on these assignments. I urge you to: Other people are far less likely than you are to buy the ideas you are trying to sell. If you collaborate, submit one copy of each assignment with all authors' names.

The assigned readings and movies in the course offer only starting points for your research. To write an original essay, you must know something about what has already been written about your topic. Therefore, consult scholarly books and articles, films, and other materials (such as movie reviews, popular articles, or scholars on campus) outside of those assigned. But I don't want book reports: The background research you conduct is *merely* background research. I want to see original research and analysis. Familiarize yourself with existing scholarship on your topic and add something truthful, insightful and original to it.

This is a film history course, and, in some way, your project must engage with American film history.

### A) Individual Conferences

Come to your conference prepared to answer the following five questions:

1. *Which of the five topics below are you writing about?*
2. *What specific question is your project answering?* Within the topics listed, you must formulate a specific (preferably narrow) question to guide your research. Your question must relate to the history of American cinema since 1961.
3. *Why is your question of interest and worth researching?* Don't tell me why you want to write about the topic. Instead, explain why someone would want to read your paper. Why should your reader care about your question? Explain how your particular approach to the topic will reveal something readers will want to know.
4. *What is your methodology?* How do you plan to go about finding answers to your question? You should be able to lay out a step-by-step plan for addressing your question and identify areas of existing research that might help you answer it. Your plan should be specific: What movies will you watch and what will you look for in those movies? What texts will you read and what will you look for in those texts?
5. *How does your project relate to film history?* How will your paper help us understand the ways in which historical conditions and, in particular, conditions within the film industry helped shape whatever aspect of American cinema you are writing about?

Checklist:  I have a specific question pertinent to American film history since 1961  
 I can justify the value of answering my question  
 I have a method for answering my question (a plan, specific movies, and specific texts)  
 My question illuminates American film history

## Paper Topics

Formulate your own research question within the parameters of one of the following topics:

- 1) Whereas, during the studio era, sequels and series films were rare phenomena, since the 1960s most Hollywood blockbusters have spawned sequels. Examine the phenomenon of sequelization in contemporary American cinema. Read what critics and scholars say about sequels (look up reviews of individual sequels and commentaries about sequelization generally), and watch a variety of films and their sequels. Your essay should answer the following key questions:
  - a. What are some of the burdens of sequel making, and what are some of the distinctive ways in which individual filmmakers have responded to such burdens?
  - b. Why did sequels become a major strategy for risk reduction after the studio era?
- 2) Despite Hollywood admonitions against stylistic idiosyncrasy, several American directors have imbued their films with a distinctive style. Examine the stylistic devices associated with one distinctive American filmmaker. What stylistic traits unify your filmmaker's work? Which earlier filmmakers does yours emulate? Most important, what were the historical or industrial conditions that enabled your filmmaker to develop his or her eccentric style within an industry that routinely discourages stylistic eccentricity?
- 3) Examine the ways in which American movies of the late 1960s and 1970s began to challenge classical Hollywood narrative practices. Your paper should answer the following questions:
  - a. What are some of the common ways in which unconventional movies of that period differ from more mainstream Hollywood movies? How much do they differ? What are some illustrative examples of those differences?
  - b. Why did narrative norms change in the way they did and at that particular time?To write this paper, you will need to understand the conventions of Hollywood narrative to see what makes some films unconventional. And you should examine not just films we have seen in the course but other films of the period (such as, perhaps, *Easy Rider*, *Pink Flamingos*, *Annie Hall*, *Mikey & Nicky*, *A Woman Under the Influence*, *The Conversation*, *The Heartbreak Kid*) in order to understand some of the peculiar narrative trends at that time.
- 4) Trace the development of one American film genre from its beginnings into contemporary cinema. How has the genre changed over the years? How do contemporary treatments of the genre differ from those of the studio-era (before 1961)? What are some exemplary instances of the developments of the genre? You might focus on the development of just one convention of the genre (the "climactic gunfight" in the Western, the "planning scene" in the big caper film, the representation of murder in the horror film, etc.). Whatever genre or genre convention you focus on, you must explain the industrial, technological, stylistic and/or historical conditions that guided the genre's development into contemporary cinema?
- 5) Select a distinct stylistic or narrative device in American cinema of the last 50 years (e.g. Steadicam practices, alternative-future narratives, CGI doctoring, out-of-chronology narration, short shot lengths), and trace its development. How and why did the pattern develop? What are the studio-era precedents for the pattern? What accounts for its emergence, development, or popularization at a given time? Did technological advances make it possible? Did changes in the film industry increase its prevalence? How has the pattern changed over time? What are some of its exemplary instances? Your paper should answer some of those questions, but the heart of the paper should be the analysis of interesting instances of the narrative or stylistic device you select.
- 6) With my permission, you may write on a different topic—one that addresses how some aspect of contemporary American cinema took the form it did at the time it did. Your topic must involve historical research, although your paper may focus on aesthetic issues. Supply me with a prepared (one paragraph) paper topic in my office hours by **September 29**. Email won't do; we must have a conversation. I will decide whether you may write on your topic based on whether it seems relevant to the course and whether you seem prepared to write about it.

## **B) Detailed Outline and Bibliography**

In preparation for your final paper, write a detailed outline that spells out the conclusions of your research up to that point and incorporates textual evidence and existing literature on the topic of study.

1. Your outline should be no longer than two double-spaced typed pages.
2. It must have a clear *thesis statement*, *supporting points*, and *evidence* for the points.
  - a. A thesis is a statement you are trying to demonstrate or prove.
  - b. Your supporting points should also be theses (not topics).
    - a. Back up all of your points and sub-points with references to specific primary and/or secondary research, including the findings of previous researchers. Secondary sources should be listed parenthetically, the last name of the author corresponding to the reference in the bibliography, as indicated in the sample below.

You may turn in late your “Detailed Outline and Bibliography.” Late work will receive no written comments from me (there is no other penalty); I’ll give you verbal comments if you bring your paper to my office hours. After a week, your paper loses 2% points for every hour it is late.

For further instructions, see “Eleven Notes about Strong Theses” and the “Sample Outline” below, as well as the sample outlines by previous students on Blackboard.

- Checklist:
- Includes thesis, supporting points, and evidence
  - Bibliography in MLA format
  - Email as MS Word attachment (title starts with your last name)

## **C) Abstract, Final Paper, and List of Works Cited**

Your final paper presents your research findings and analysis. It includes:

- 1) An Abstract Summary: A clear and explicit thesis stating the paper’s conclusions, placed after the title and before the beginning of the paper;
- 2) A discussion of your findings, organized according to a series of points (supporting theses) with discussions of the evidence in support of the points.
- 3) A Works Cited page that lists all of the print and online resources cited in the paper, organized alphabetically in MLA format. Do not include film titles in this list.

The length of your paper should be determined by how much you have to say and how efficient you are in saying it.

Your final paper may be quite different from your outline; you will presumably change your points after you learn more and continue to conduct research.

Final papers will not receive comments. With this assignment, there are no extensions, and your paper loses 2% points for every hour past the due date.

- Checklist:
- Descriptive essay title
  - Thesis statement (“abstract summary”) at the top
  - Essay in MLA format
  - Works Cited page in MLA format
  - email as MS Word attachment (title starts with your last name).

## REFERENCES BOOKS AND DATABASES

### Books

The following texts on Hollywood cinema may help you with your research projects.

- Balio, Tino, ed. *The American Film Industry*, second edition (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1985)
- Balio, Tino. *Hollywood in the Age of Television* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990).
- Berliner, Todd. *Hollywood Incoherent: Narration in Seventies Cinema* (Austin: U of Texas P, 2010).
- Bordwell, David, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson. *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia UP)
- Cook, David. *A History of Narrative Film*, Third Edition (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996).
- Cook, David. *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam, 1970-1979* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2000).
- King, Geoff, Claire Malloy, and Yannis Tzioumakis, ed. *American Independent Cinema: Indie, Indiewood, and Beyond* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013)
- King, Geoff. *New Hollywood Cinema: An Introduction* (New York: Columbia UP, 2002).
- Lewis, Jon. *American Film: A History* (New York: Norton, 2007)
- Naremore, James. *Acting in the Cinema* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 1988).
- Maltby, Richard. *Hollywood Cinema*, Second Edition (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003).
- Monaco, Paul. *The Sixties: 1960-1969* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2001).
- Neale, Steve and Murray Smith, ed. *Contemporary Hollywood Cinema* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998).
- Prince, Stephen. *Digital Visual Effects in Cinema: The Seduction of Reality* (Rutgers UP, 2012)
- Prince, Stephen, ed. *The Horror Film* (Rutgers UP, 2004).
- Prince, Stephen. *A New Pot of Gold: Hollywood Under the Electronic Rainbow, 1980-1989* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2000).
- Prince, Stephen. *Screening Violence* (Rutgers UP, 2000).
- Schatz, Thomas. *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1981).
- Thompson, Kristin and David Bordwell. *Film History: An Introduction* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994).
- Wasser, Frederick. *Veni, Vidi, Video: The Hollywood Empire and the VCR* (Austin: U Texas P, 2001).

### Databases

Randall library has a webpage devoted to film studies resources: <http://library.uncw.edu/subjects/film-studies>.

## TEN NOTES ABOUT STRONG THESES (AND SUPPORTING POINTS)

Since the supporting points of your outline and final paper should also be theses, these notes pertain both to your main thesis and to each of your supporting points:

1. A thesis is a statement to be demonstrated or proved.
2. A thesis is not just what the paper is about (the thesis is not the “topic” of the paper); a thesis briefly and explicitly states the paper’s *conclusion*. (“The use of low-key lighting in *Touch of Evil*” is a topic, whereas “*Touch of Evil*’s low-key lighting makes some of the characters’ faces appear distorted and grotesque” is a thesis.)
3. Your thesis should make complete sense to readers on its own. Readers should understand the paper’s thesis without reading anything but the thesis. (Unclear thesis: “The first fight scene in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* makes the spectator feel the impact of each blow.” Clear thesis: “During the first fight between Jen and Yu in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, the dynamic changes in distance of framing, angle, and height mimic the often furious and quick movements of the characters and give the audience a sense of constant motion.”) The rest of the paper will set about *convincing* readers of what you are saying, but readers should *understand* your thesis before you try to persuade them of it.
4. Your thesis should be specific and complex enough to sustain the paper. Specific and complex theses tend to be more interesting than general and simple ones, and they are more likely to require explanation and persuasive argument. A rule of thumb regarding specificity: *Make sure that what you say about your clip or movie could be said only about that one clip or movie (not many movies)*.
5. Write about your movie *as* a movie; don’t write about what the movie is about. In other words, don’t movies as an occasion to discuss other issues. (Thesis that is *not* about movies: “We can see the importance of intimacy in romantic relationships by studying the depiction of romance in film noir.” Thesis about movies: “Film noir depicts romance as dangerous by surrounding sexually alluring female figures with imagery that evokes feelings of danger and mystery.”)
6. Your thesis must be demonstrable. Your job is not merely to tell your reader what you think: Your job is to *persuade* your reader to think what you think.
7. Your thesis should not be obvious. If we know and agree with your thesis before we read your paper, what’s the point of reading, or writing, the paper?
8. Your thesis should be true. If *you* don’t believe what you’re saying, certainly your reader won’t.
9. Your thesis is the *result* of your research, not the starting-point: The thesis is your project’s conclusion. In its final form, the thesis is the *last* thing you come up with before you write your final draft.
10. Before you hand in your outline and essay, ensure that your thesis statement and that each of your supporting points is a statement to be proved or demonstrated that is clear, specific, complex, about the movie, demonstrable, not obvious, true, and the conclusion of your research. If so, then your points are probably in excellent shape.

**Sample Outline:** “The Genre Film as Booby Trap: Seventies Genre Bending and *The French Connection*” by Todd Berliner

**I. Thesis:** *The French Connection* exploits viewers’ expectations of police-detective-film formulas, misleading viewers into expecting a conventional genre film. Following trends in seventies genre variation, the film ultimately deviates from its genre in ways that unsettle viewers and catch them off guard.

**II. Point 1 :** Prior to its conclusion, *The French Connection* works mostly as a straightforward police-detective film.

**Example:** Explanation of police-detective film conventions. Detective’s typical character traits: conflict with his superior, energetic pursuit of crime, strategic disregard of the law, determination, obsessive commitment to his case, impulsive actions.

**Example :** Police-detective film conventions in *The Big Combo*, *Madigan*, *Dirty Harry*, *Bullitt*, *The Narrow Margin*, *The Big Heat*, *On Dangerous Ground*.

**Example:** Genre scholarship (Kaminsky, Cawelti, Neale, Schatz, Braudy, Gehring, Grant).

**Example:** Formulaic examples from the movie (especially car-crash and bar scenes).

**III. Point 2 :** While much of *The French Connection* does indeed follow police-detective convention, several incidents throughout the movie disrupt the generic simplicity of the story and of viewers’ responses to their protagonist, Detective Popeye Doyle. In this way, the film follows deviant trends in seventies genre use.

**Example :** Doyle’s single-mindedness in car crash scene.

**Example :** Doyle’s insensitivity in sniper scene

**Example :** detective’s racism, fanaticism and other unappealing qualities.

**Example :** examples of movie commentators and scholars who try (and fail) to limit the movie to the dimensions of its generic mold (Shedlin, Kael, Epps, Schickel).

**Example:** Tendency of seventies cinema to disrupt genre conventions (Cook, Lev, Man)

**IV. Point 3:** The ending of *The French Connection* unpredictably alters the trajectory of the narrative. What spectators took to be the film’s central concern—Doyle’s battle with the drug smugglers—is revealed as a misinterpretation of the narrative. In the end, the movie becomes *about* all the troubling elements that disrupted the simplicity of spectator responses and that distinguish the movie from standard police-detective films.

**Example :** *French Connection*’s deviant conclusion—the final shootout scene

**Example :** Doyle’s indifference to killing Mulderig

**Example :** closing captions show detective’s failure; detractors were right.

**Example :** cinematography emphasizes Doyle’s fanaticism and dubiousness.

**V. Point 4:** The film capitalizes on the fact that the stock virtues of a generic thriller detective have a darker side. In Doyle, these virtues emerge ambiguously as character flaws, the cause of his failure as a cop.

**Example :** Doyle’s energetic pursuit of crime and disregard of the law are linked to his brutality.

**Example :** His determination and obsessive commitment to his case emerge as fanaticism and callous indifference to victims.

**Example:** His impulsive, shoot-from-the-hip temperament results in the death of a fellow officer and leads to his suspect’s escape and a string of acquittals and reduced sentences.

## Works Cited

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- Cawelti, John. "Chinatown and Generic Transformation in Recent American Films," *Film Genre Reader*, ed. Barry Keith Grant. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1988. Print.
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- Neale, Stephen. *Genre*. London: British Film Institute-Film Availability Services, 1980.
- Schatz, Thomas. *Hollywood Genres*. New York: Random House, 1981. Print.
- Schickel, Richard. "A Real Look at a Tough Cop." Rev. of *The French Connection*. *Life* 71 (19 November 1971): 13. Print.
- Shedlin, Michael. "Police Oscar: *The French Connection*," *Film Quarterly* 25 (Summer 1972): 4. Print.