

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS
FST 496 SENIOR SEMINAR IN FILM STUDIES
AESTHETIC PLEASURE IN HOLLYWOOD CINEMA

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READING SUMMARIES AND DISCUSSION TOPICS

At the very beginning of every class with an assigned reading, students must submit, by hard-copy, a summary of each reading. Each summary should be no longer than 1½ double-spaced pages. Summaries condense and distill the authors' main points. They are designed to ensure that you are prepared to discuss the readings in class, that you are understanding what you read, and that you practice writing clear, cogent, organized, grammatically correct prose. They moreover help you practice the skill of fairly explaining someone else's argument.

You should summarize the main points from all portions of the reading: Paraphrase the points (put them in your own words) so that I know you understand them. I don't want a blow-by-blow of the article ("And then the author writes about suspense..."); I don't want a summary of the topics of the article ("The author explains how the movie generates suspense"); and I don't want your opinion of the article ("The author correctly characterizes the feeling of suspense."). Instead, summarize the author's points, as though *you* were the author ("A film generates suspense by cuing spectators to worry about future events."). *Write your summaries so that the authors themselves would agree with what you have written.*

Organize your summary. Each of your paragraphs should explain one of the author's chief points, and your sentences should move logically from one to the next. In your first paragraph, explain the author's main point (the thesis of the reading), not necessarily the author's first point.

Summaries cannot be made up or turned in late. If you miss a summary deadline, you will get a zero on the assignment; however, I will drop your four lowest scores. If you know that you must miss a class, you may turn in your reading summary early—at least 30 minutes before the start of class on the day it is due—to my campus mailbox or by email as a MS Word attachment.

At the end of each summary, write out one or two *discussion topics* or *questions* that will provoke fruitful class discussions about the reading. Propose something about that reading that you yourself want to talk about, such as:

1. A question you had about a passage or point in the reading;
2. A connection between the readings and whatever film we are studying that week;
3. A passage that you want to look at closely in class and why;
4. A juxtaposition of two or more articles we have read in the class;

Students should be prepared to start the discussions about their own topics.

- Checklist:
- a separate reading summary for each article or chapter
 - summarizes main points from all parts of the reading
 - your first paragraph summarizes the thesis (main point) of the reading
 - 1½ pages or fewer per summary
 - typed / double-spaced / printed hard copy
 - includes 1 or 2 discussion topics at the end of each summary
 - complete, clear, logically organized, grammatically correct sentences.

Extra Credit

Within a week of receiving back a graded reading summary, you may submit a revision of your summary for re-grading, addressing the issues indicated in my comments on the first version. In order to earn a better grade, your revision should be substantial, addressing not just easily fixed issues but also any problems with organization, syntax, clarity, and mischaracterizations of the author's argument. The new grade will replace the old one. You may take advantage of this extra-credit opportunity with up to four reading summaries submitted during the semester. Submit the first version (*including* my comments) with the revision.

AESTHETIC ANALYSIS PAPER ASSIGNMENTS

Over a period of eight weeks, students will complete a series of three assignments that culminates in a polished aesthetic analysis of a Hollywood film or group of films, contributing something original to our understanding of Hollywood aesthetics:

- A) Prospectus and Working Bibliography
- B) Aesthetic Analysis Paper (version 1): Abstract, Paper, and List of Works Cited
- C) Aesthetic Analysis Paper (final version): Abstract, Paper, and List of Works Cited

Your paper will take one of the following two forms:

1) My Movie or Movies are Unique

This type of paper demonstrates that a Hollywood film or group of films has a unique way of supplying aesthetic pleasure. Your paper is an effort to demonstrate the films' peculiar aesthetic properties.

2) My Movie or Movies are Representative

This type of paper uses a Hollywood film or group of films as a case study to explain the pleasures of an aesthetic feature found in a number of Hollywood films. You might examine a narrative device (such as multi-protagonist or alternative-future narratives), stylistic device (Technicolor, optical POV shots, the long take), ideological feature (such as criminal protagonists) or genre property (the "meet cute").

Although you may focus on one film, examine your aesthetic feature across a range of Hollywood films, exploring the ways in which different filmmakers have used it.

Prepare your papers and bibliographies using MLA formatting and style. The Purdue Online Writing Lab explains MLA format and provides examples: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/01/>.

You may collaborate, in pairs, on these assignments; other people are far less likely than you are to buy the ideas you are trying to sell. If you collaborate, submit one copy with both authors' names on it.

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

The target audience for your paper is someone who has thought about your topic and who wants to learn more about it, someone like me, your professor, who, by a stroke of good fortune, happens to be your real audience. Or, perhaps even better, think of the students in this class as your audience; if your papers are good, they will be.

Some Hortatory Advice about Writing About Movies

- If you contribute to the understanding of any part of a movie or movies, however small that part is, you will have done your job.
- I care most about the specificity of your ideas, the precision and vividness of your analyses, the originality and ambitiousness of your project, and the clarity and validity of your thinking and prose.
- 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?*
- 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.
- 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.

A) Prospectus and Working Bibliography

A *prospectus* is a written proposal (about 500 words) for your research project. In it, you identify:

1. *A question* pertinent to Hollywood aesthetics;
2. *Why the question is of interest and worth researching.* Don't tell readers why you want to write about the topic; we don't care about that. Explain why we should want to read your paper. Why should we care about your question? Explain how your particular approach to the topic will reveal something readers will want to know.
3. *Your methodology.* How do you plan to find answers to your question? Lay out a precise plan for addressing your question, and identify areas of existing research that might help 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?

A working bibliography is a comprehensive list of articles, books, book chapters, movie reviews, films, etc. pertaining to the topic you are writing about. Avoid websites that do not have a proven history of reliable scholarship; instead use academic books and articles and the electronic databases that Randall library subscribes to. Separate your list of film titles from your list of other resources (such as books and articles, which should all be grouped together.). Your bibliography should be in MLA format.

On the date indicated in the syllabus, each student will bring to class 16 copies of his or her prospectus and working bibliography, which the class will discuss for about 15 minutes each. The writer will take notes on the discussion, without participating, so write your prospectuses in such a way that they require no explanation. You should make your work as specific and complete as possible so that the class may offer criticism and suggestions that will help you complete your project successfully.

Checklist: 1) a question, 2) why the question is worth researching, and 3) methodology.
 bibliography in MLA format bring to class 16 typed/double spaced copies

B) Aesthetic Analysis Paper (version 1): Abstract, Paper, and List of Works Cited

Although you will rewrite this paper later, version 1 is not a "rough draft." A rough draft is garbage, and you don't show other people your garbage. You should submit a polished paper, your best work.

Your paper presents your research findings and analysis and includes:

- 1) A clear and explicit "abstract summary" of the paper's conclusions (i.e. the paper's thesis statement), 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. If you want to include film titles, create a separate "Filmography" page.

The length of your paper depends on how much you have to say and how efficient you are in saying it.

You may turn in this assignment late. Any excuse for lateness will be accepted, no matter how improbable; however, late work will receive no written comments (there is no other penalty), and an extension lasts one week past the due date. After a week, I deduct 2% for every hour it is late.

Submit the paper as an email attachment (MS Word documents only). The title of your document should start with your last name ("yourlastname_paper.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.

Checklist: Descriptive essay title
 Thesis statement (Abstract Summary) at the top
 MLA format
 emailed as MS Word attachment (attachment title starts with your last name).

C) Aesthetic Analysis Paper (final version): Abstract, Paper, and List of Works Cited

Your final paper may be very different from the version you turned in earlier. I assume that you will change your points after you receive my comments and continue to conduct research and revise. I'm looking to see how much you have rethought and revised your paper; I'm looking for improvement.

Submit the paper as an email attachment (MS Word documents only). The title of your document should start with your last name ("yourlastname_paper.doc"). Final papers will not receive comments, just grades, and there are no extensions; I will deduct 2% every hour it is late.

- Checklist:
- Descriptive essay title
 - Thesis statement (Abstract Summary) at the top
 - MLA format
 - emailed as MS Word attachment (attachment title starts with your last name)

ELEVEN NOTES ABOUT STRONG THESES AND SUPPORTING POINTS

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 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 use the clip 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 dark 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, rest assured your reader won't either.
9. Your thesis is the result of your research, not the starting-point: it is your conclusion. Your paper's thesis, in its final form, 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.