

**WRITING ASSIGNMENTS**  
FST 376 AMERICAN CINEMA 1927-1960

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**General Information**

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.

Please submit your written work as an email attachment (MS Word documents only) by the due dates indicated in the course schedule. 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.

**Motion Picture Production Code Report**

Students will write a brief report (2-4 pages) on the correspondence between a film studio and the Production Code Administration (PCA) concerning one American film released between 1927 and 1960. This assignment is designed to give you experience conducting archival research, dealing with primary texts, and explaining historical events to readers unfamiliar with them.

You must access the *Hollywood, Censorship, and the Motion Picture Production Code, 1927-1968* Database, available through Randall Library’s catalogue. This electronic database contains archival letters between the studios and the PCA—scanned from the collection of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences’ Margaret Herrick Library—concerning morally objectionable material in 500 American films. Although it includes only a fraction of the library’s PCA correspondence, it is a treasure trove for anyone conducting research on the Code’s effect on individual films. To access the database, go to Archives Unbound at <http://libcat.uncw.edu/record=b2409057~S4>; click “UNCW users Search subscribed collections”: click “Proceed”: click the “BROWSE COLLECTIONS” tab: click “Next” (second page). You will see the database listed there. To read the correspondence about a film, click “View All Documents,” type a film title into the search box, and press “GO.”

You should select a film that satisfies the following criteria:

- It was released between 1927 and 1960.
- You have seen it.
- The film is included in the database.
- The PCA had concerns about its content.

After reviewing all of the documents in the database on your film, report on the correspondence between the PCA and the studios, explaining the PCA’s objections, the changes requested, and the studio’s response. Organize your report as follows:

- *Introductory paragraph*: Offer a general overview of the correspondence, including timeframe, participants, the film discussed, the studio involved, the main areas of concern, and your conclusions about how the parties resolved the concerns.
- *Subsequent paragraphs*: Detail the specific issues of concern to the PCA (sometimes identified in correspondence as “Will H. Hays,” or “Joseph I. Breen”), the PCA’s directions to the filmmakers, and controversies discussed in the correspondence. Refer to specific letters by date, writer, and recipient (For instance, “In his June 6, 1941 letter to Jack Warner, President of Warner Bros., Joseph Breen again complains about Joel Cairo’s characterization as a ‘pansy type’ in *The Maltese Falcon*.”)
- *Optional (extra credit)*: Explain how the filmmakers addressed the PCA’s concerns in the finished film. Did they skirt PCA objections? What violations, if any, were left in?

## **Final Research Project**

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

- A) Individual Conference with Professor Berliner in which you identify a *question* you will answer, a *justification* of your question, and a *methodology* for your paper;
- 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 what has already been written about your topic. You must 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 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 of the period 1927-1960.

### **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.

## Paper Topics

Pick one of the following topics:

- 1) What is the contribution of casting and the star system to the creation of one of the films we have seen in this course? Research the casting of one film (How did the filmmakers choose their cast and why?), as well as previous performances by the film's lead players. In what ways did the film exploit the popularity, personas and performance styles of its lead actors?
- 2) Trace the development of one American film genre from its beginnings through the 1950s. How has the genre changed over the years? What are some exemplary instances of the developments of the genre? I suggest that, rather than tracing the development of all of a genre's conventions, you focus on the development of just one convention of the genre (the "climactic gunfight" in the Western, the couple's final union in screwball comedy, the representation of murder in the horror film, etc.). Whatever genre or genre convention you focus on, you must explain the industrial, technological, or historical conditions that guided the genre's development during the studio era?
- 3) What was the effect of film regulation on one group of Hollywood films of the studio era (e.g. crime films; Westerns; horror films; films that depict gay characters, adultery, or brutality; films with sex scenes or nudity—you decide the grouping)? Research the impact of the Motion Picture Production Code on your group of films. Using the *Hollywood, Censorship, and the Motion Picture Production Code Database*, study the correspondence between the PCA and studios about your films. And examine the films themselves to understand filmmakers' creative treatment of illicit subject matter.
- 4) Examine the moments of transition in and out of song in musicals of the Hollywood studio era. How do the films negotiate such moments and how are they able to get away with such an evidently anti-realistic convention? How did the convention of "spontaneous song" in cinema develop over time and what guided those developments?
- 5) With my permission, you may write on a different topic—one that examines some aspect of American cinema history of the period 1927 and 1960. Your topic must involve historical research. Supply me with a prepared (one paragraph) paper topic in my office hours by *February 15*. 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 feasible, and you seem prepared to write about it.

### A) Individual Conferences

Come to your conference prepared to answer the following five questions (write down your answers):

1. *Which topic above are you writing about?*
2. *What specific question is your project answering?* Within the topics listed above, you must formulate a specific (and hopefully narrow) question to guide your research. Your question must relate to the history of American cinema between 1927 and 1960.
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 kinds of 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 conditions within the American film industry helped shape whatever aspect of American cinema you are writing about?

- Checklist:  I have a question pertinent to American film history 1927-1960  
 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 helps illuminate American film history

## B) Detailed Outline and Bibliography

In preparation for your final paper, you will 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. *Thesis*: A thesis is a statement of what you are trying to demonstrate or prove.
  - b. *Supporting Points*: Your supporting points should also be theses (not topics).
    - a. *Evidence*: Support 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.” Any excuse for lateness will be accepted, no matter how improbable; however, late work will receive no written comments from me (there is no other penalty), and I won’t accept work handed in later than one week past the due date (I’ll give you verbal comments if you bring your paper to my office hours).

For further instructions, see “Ten 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. They may not be turned in late.

- 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).

## REFERENCE BOOKS AND DATABASES FOR YOUR RESEARCH PROJECTS

### Books

- Balio, Tino, ed. *The American Film Industry*, second edition (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1985)
- Balio, Tino. *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise, 1930-1939* (New York: Scribner, 1993).
- Balio, Tino. *Hollywood in the Age of Television* (Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1990).
- Bordwell, David, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson. *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia UP)
- Cameron, Ian, ed. *The Book of Film Noir* (New York: Continuum, 1993)
- Cameron, Ian and Douglas Pye, eds. *The Movie Book of the Western* (Studio Vista, 1996)
- Cook, David. *A History of Narrative Film*, Third Edition (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996).
- Crafton, Donald. *The Talkies: American Cinema's Transition to Sound, 1926-1931* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1997).
- Dixon, Wheeler Winston. *American Cinema of the 1940s* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2005)
- Doherty, Thomas. *Pre-Code Hollywood: Sex, Immorality, and Insurrection in American Cinema, 1930-1934* (New York: Columbia UP, 1999)
- Doherty, Thomas. *Hollywood Censor: Joseph I. Breen and the Production Code Administration* (New York: Columbia UP, 2007)
- Feuer, Jane. *The Hollywood Musical* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1982).
- Fischer, Lucy. *American Cinema of the 1920s* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2009)
- Gomery, Douglas. *The Hollywood Studio System: A History* (BFI, 2005)
- Hark, Ina. *American Cinema of the 1930s* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2007)
- Karnick, Kristine Brunovska and Henry Jenkins, eds. *Classical Hollywood Comedy* (New York: Routledge, 1995)
- Keating, Patrick. *Hollywood Lighting from the Silent Era to Film Noir* (New York: Columbia UP, 2009)
- Lev, Peter. *The Fifties: Transforming the Screen 1950-1959* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2006).
- 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).
- Naremore, James. *More Than Night: Film Noir in its Contexts* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2008)
- Neale, Steve, ed. *The Classical Hollywood Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2012)
- Maltby, Richard. *Hollywood Cinema*, Second Edition (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003).
- Mahar, Karen Ward. *Women Filmmakers in Early Hollywood* (Johns Hopkins UP, 2008)
- Pommerance, Murray. *American Cinema of the 1950s* (Rutgers UP, 2005)
- Prince, Stephen. *Classical Film Violence: Designing and Regulating Brutality in Hollywood Cinema, 1930-1968* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 2003)
- Schatz, Thomas. *Boom and Bust: The American Cinema in the 1940s* (New York: Scribner, 1997).
- Schatz, Thomas. *The Genius of the System: Hollywood Filmmaking in the Studio Era* (Pantheon, 1988)
- Schatz, Thomas. *Hollywood Genres: Formulas, Filmmaking, and the Studio System* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1981).
- Silver, Alain and James Ursini. *Film Noir Reader* (New York: Limelight Edition, 1996).
- Sklar, Robert. *Movie-Made America*, revised edition (Vintage, 1994)
- Staiger, Janet, ed. *The Studio System* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers, 1995)
- Thompson, Kristin and David Bordwell. *Film History: An Introduction* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1994).

### Databases

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

*Hollywood, Censorship, and the Motion Picture Production Code, 1927-1968 Database*

To access the database, go to Archives Unbound at <http://libcat.uncw.edu/record=b2409057~S4>: click "UNCW users Search subscribed collections": click "Proceed": click the "BROWSE COLLECTIONS" tab: click "Next" (second page). You will see the database listed there.

## 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 use 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.

**Evidence:** 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.

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

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

**Evidence:** Formulaic examples from *The French Connection* (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 trends in seventies genre variation.

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

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

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

**Evidence :** 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).

**Evidence:** 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.

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

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

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

**Evidence :** 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.

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

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

**Evidence:** 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.
- Cook, David A. *Lost Illusions: American Cinema in the Shadow of Watergate and Vietnam, 1970-1979*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2000.
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- Kaminsky, Stuart M. *American Film Genres: Approaches to a Critical Theory of Popular Film*. New York: Dell Publishing, 1974.
- Lev, Peter. *American Films of the 70s: Conflicting Visions*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2000.
- Man, Glenn. *Radical Visions: American Film Renaissance, 1967-1976*. Westport, C.T.: Greenwood Press, 1994.
- Neale, Stephen. *Genre*. London: British Film Institute-Film Availability Services, 1980.
- Schatz, Thomas. *Hollywood Genres*. New York: Random House, 1981.
- Schickel, Richard. "A Real Look at a Tough Cop." Rev. of *The French Connection*. *Life* 71 (19 November, 1971): 13
- Shedlin, Michael. "Police Oscar: *The French Connection*," *Film Quarterly* 25 (Summer 1972): 4.