

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS
FST 379 STUDIES IN FILM HISTORY: AMERICAN CINEMA OF THE 1970S

PROFESSOR TODD BERLINER

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General Instructions for the Writing Assignments

Cite all of your sources. Failure to cite sources is plagiarism, which is academic corruption.

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/>.

On the Blackboard page for this course, you will 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.docx”). 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.

When you’re writing, 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?*

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 released between 1967 and 1979, 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 13 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* and *Lexus-Nexus*, two 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: One issue—one paragraph. Synthesize the critical reception for your reader. 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. Late work will receive no written comments from me (there is no other penalty), but I’ll give you verbal comments if you bring your paper to my office hours. After a week past the due date, your paper loses 1% point for every half-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 a year of the film’s initial release
 - Works Cited page in MLA format (including date of the initial review)
 - Email as MS Word attachment (document title starts with your last name, e.g. “yourlastname_AClockworkOrange.doc”).

RESEARCH PROJECT

Over a period of about two months, students will complete the following assignments:

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

I encourage you to collaborate on these assignments: Other people are far less likely than you are to buy the ideas you are selling. Submit one copy of your final paper with all of the authors' names.

The assigned readings and movies in the course offer only starting points for your research. To write an informed essay, you must know more about what has already been written about your topic. 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 and historical material on your topic and add something truthful, insightful and original to it.

Everyone's project must engage with film history.

Paper Topics

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

- 1) Examine the controversial production and/or reception history of a controversial American film released between 1969 and 1979. You will study historical evidence from the period of the film's release (e.g. movie reviews, editorials, newspaper articles, the film's CARA rating history or distribution history, box office statistics, trade journal reports, and/or other evidence from the period) in order to demonstrate how the controversy surrounding your film was expressed at the time. You will also examine the film itself, analyzing those elements that caused controversy. Some examples of controversial films include *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), *The Wild Bunch* (1969), *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971), *Carnal Knowledge* (1971), *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), *Straw Dogs* (1971), *Deep Throat* (1972), *Pink Flamingos* (1972), *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978/1980), *Pretty Baby* (1978), *Caligula* (1979), and *The Warriors* (1979), but feel free to pick another controversial film from the period. A controversial film is one that caused people to disagree about it publicly.
- 2) Trace the development of an American film genre into seventies cinema. How do seventies treatments of the genre differ from earlier treatments? What industrial, technological, historical, or other factors contributed to the genre's development and its particular expression in the 1970s? Analyze some exemplary instances of the genre's development: Which films instantiate those developments or represent major advances?
- 3) Despite Hollywood admonitions against stylistic idiosyncrasy, several American directors of the 1970s (Stanley Kubrick, Martin Scorsese, Woody Allen, Robert Altman, Elaine May, Brian De Palma, and others) tested the limits of the classical Hollywood style of filmmaking. Examine the artistic properties associated with one stylistically bold American filmmaker from the period of this course. Which earlier filmmakers does yours emulate? Most important, what were the industrial, technological, and/or historical conditions that enabled your filmmaker to develop his or her eccentric style within an industry that normally discourages stylistic eccentricity?
- 4) With my permission, you may write on a different topic. Your topic must involve research of seventies film history. Supply me with a prepared (one paragraph) paper topic in my office hours by **February 20**. Email won't do; we must have a conversation. (This meeting is separate from your conference with me, which will occur later.) I will decide whether you may write on your topic based on whether it seems relevant to the course and you seem prepared to write about it.

A) Individual Conferences

Come to your conference prepared with written answers to the following five questions:

1. *Which of the three topics above are you writing about?*
2. *What specific question is your project answering?* Within the topics listed, you must formulate a specific (narrow) question to guide your research. Your question must relate to the history of American cinema of the period. (Tip: A question ends with a question mark.)
3. *Why is your question of interest and worth researching?* Don't tell me why you want to write about your topic; nobody cares. Instead, explain why your reader should want to read your paper? How will your approach to the topic reveal something that 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 during the 1970s helped shape whatever aspect of seventies cinema you are writing about?

I hope to see you taking notes during our conference. A lot is going to happen there, and you won't remember it all.

- Checklist:
- I have a specific question pertinent to American cinema of the 1970s
 - I can justify the value of answering my question
 - I have a method for answering my question
 - My question engages with American film history in the seventies
 - I have a means for taking notes.

B) 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 main body of your 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; if you want to include film titles, create a separate Filmography.

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

You may turn in late your Final Paper, up to one week past the due date. Late work will receive no written comments from me; there is no other penalty. After one week past the due date, your paper loses 1% point for every half-hour it is 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, e.g. "yourlastname_paper.doc").

REFERENCE BOOKS AND DATABASES

Books

- Balio, Tino, ed. *The American Film Industry*, second edition (Madison: U of Wisconsin P, 1985)
- Biskind, Peter. *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls: How the Sex-Drugs-And Rock 'N' Roll Generation Saved Hollywood*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1998.
- Bookbinder, Robert. *The Films of the Seventies*. New Jersey: Citadel Press, 1982.
- Bordwell, David, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson. *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960* (New York: Columbia UP)
- Buckland, Warren. *Directed by Steven Spielberg: Poetics of the Contemporary Hollywood Blockbuster*. New York: Continuum Press, 2006.
- Cagin, Seth and Philip Dray. *Hollywood Films of the Seventies: Sex, Drugs, Violence, Rock 'n' roll & Politics*. New York: Harper & Row, 1984.
- Carney, Ray, ed. *Cassavetes on Cassavetes*. London, New York: Faber and Faber, 2001
- King, Geoff. *New Hollywood Cinema: An Introduction* (New York: Columbia UP, 2002).
- Chown, Jeffrey. *Hollywood Auteur: Francis Coppola*. New York: Praeger, 1988.
- Clover, Carol. *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 1992.
- Elsaesser, Thomas, Alexander Horwath, and Noel King, ed. *The Last Great American Picture Show: New Hollywood Cinema in the 1970s*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2004.
- Jacobs, Diane. *Hollywood Renaissance*. South Brunswick: A. S. Barnes, 1977.
- King, Geoff. *New Hollywood Cinema: An Introduction*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2002.
- Kolker, Robert Phillip. *A Cinema of Loneliness: Penn, Kubrick, Scorsese, Altman*, 2nd Edition. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988.
- Lev, Peter. *American Films of the 70s: Conflicting Visions*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2000.
- Lewis, Jon, ed. *The New American Cinema*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998.
- Lewis, Jon. *American Film: A History* (New York: Norton, 2007)
- Maltby, Richard. *Hollywood Cinema*, Second Edition (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003).
- Man, Glenn. *Radical Visions: American Film Renaissance, 1967-1976*. Westport, C.T.: Greenwood Press, 1994.
- Miller, Stephen Paul. *The Seventies Now: Culture as Surveillance*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1999.
- Monaco, Paul. *The Sixties: 1960-1969* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2001).
- 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).
- Pye, Michael and Lynda Myles. *The Movie Brats: How the Film Generation Took Over Hollywood*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1979.
- 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).
- Wood, Robin. *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1986.

Databases

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

Interlibrary Loan (ILL)

Every student must sign up for a free Interlibrary Loan (ILL) account through Randall Library: <http://library.uncw.edu/ill>. ILL allows you to obtain books and articles unavailable in Randall Library. You will need ILL to conduct research for your paper, but it can take time to get a book, so order early.

WorldCat

To learn what books are available on your topic, use WorldCat, a free website that allows you to look up every book written on a topic. Go to www.worldcat.org, select "Books," and type in your search words.

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.