

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

PROFESSOR TODD BERLINER

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**GENERAL INSTRUCTIONS**

Cite all of your sources of information. Failure to cite sources is plagiarism.

Prepare your papers using MLA formatting and style. Click [here](#) for the Excelsior Online Writing Lab, which explains MLA format and provides examples.

On the Canvas site for this course, you will find sample papers—exemplary work written by students in previous courses.

Submit your written work as an email attachment (MS Word documents only) by the due date indicated in the course schedule. The title of your documents should start with your last name (e.g. “yourlastname\_paper.docx”). I will comment on your work using the “track changes” feature in MS Word and email the document back to you.

**Some Advice:**

- 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.

## 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.

Select a film that satisfies the following five criteria:

1. It was released between 1927 and 1960.
2. We are not seeing the film in this class.
3. You have seen it (or are willing to see it before writing your report)
4. The film is included in the *Hollywood, Censorship, and the Motion Picture Production Code, 1927-1968 Database*.
5. The PCA had concerns about its content.

To obtain the PCA correspondence about your movie, you will 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 (a fraction of the library's PCA correspondence).

To access the database, click [here](#). To see a list of films in the database, click "View All Documents." To read the correspondence about an individual film, type the film title into the search box, and press "GO." [Alternatively, 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.]

After reviewing the database's documents on your film, report on the correspondence between the PCA and the studios, explaining the PCA's objections, the changes requested, and any studio response.

Organize your report as follows:

- *Introductory paragraph*: Summarize the correspondence, including the timeframe, participants, the film discussed (including date of release), the studio involved, the main areas of PCA concern, and your conclusions about how the parties resolved the concerns. Be specific.
- *Subsequent paragraphs*: Synthesize the main concerns of the PCA (sometimes identified in correspondence as "Will H. Hays," "Joseph I. Breen" or "Geoffrey M. Shurlock"), the PCA's directives to the filmmakers, and controversies discussed in the correspondence. Refer to specific letters by date, writer, and recipient. Identify the people by name and title. (For instance, "In his letter of June 6, 1941 to Jack Warner, President of Warner Bros., Joseph Breen of the PCA again complains about Joel Cairo's characterization as a 'pansy type' in the script for *The Maltese Falcon*.")
- *Organization*: Organize your paper point by point, not letter by letter: After the introduction, each paragraph should explain *one* controversial issue discussed in the correspondence (e.g. brutality, or sexuality, or the depiction of drinking). Summarize and synthesize the issues of concern, one issue at a time; don't give a blow-by-blow of the letters. Remember: One paragraph = one issue.

You may turn in your report late. Any excuse for lateness, no matter how improbable, will be accepted, up to one week past the due date (After a week, your paper loses 1% point for every half-hour it is late.) Late work will receive no written comments from me (there is no other penalty), but I'll give you verbal feedback if you bring your paper to my office hours.

Checklist:  The paper makes clear the source of all included information by indicating the sender, the recipient, and the date of the document that supplied the information.  
 Email as MS Word attachment (attachment title starts with your last name; e.g. yourlastname\_MalteseFalcon.docx). Don't send it through OneDrive.

## FILM HISTORY RESEARCH PROJECT

Students will complete the following series of assignments:

- A) Individual Conference with Professor Berliner in which you identify a research *question* that you will answer, a *justification* of your question, and a *methodology* for your paper.
- B) Abstract, Paper, and List of Works Cited.

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 in class. But I don't want book reports: Your background research is *merely* background research. I want original analysis. Familiarize yourself with existing scholarship on your topic and add something truthful, insightful and original to it.

I encourage you to collaborate on these assignments: Other people are far less likely than you are to buy the ideas you are selling. If you collaborate, come together to your conference and submit one copy of your paper with all of the authors' names. And copy your teammates when you email the paper to me.

### Paper Topics

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

- 1) What was the effect of film regulation on one group of Hollywood films of the studio era (e.g. gangster films, films that allude to homosexuality, films that depict brutality, films with sex, etc. 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*, you will study the correspondence between the PCA and studios about your films. In addition, you will examine the films themselves to understand filmmakers' creative treatment of potentially objectionable subject matter. (**Tip:** This topic is for students who want to go deeper into the PCA archives and compare PCA correspondence on film scripts to the films themselves.)
- 2) Examine a single stylistic or narrative device from one period within the studio era (I hope you pick your own device, but what follows are some examples: devices for integrating sound during the 1927-1931 period; network narratives or montage sequences in the 1930s; deep focus, voiceover narration, or flashbacks in the 1940s; location shooting in the 1950s; etc.). What are some exemplary instances of the device? What accounts for its emergence, development, or popularization at a given time? Did technological advances make it possible? How did industry conditions affect its prevalence? How did filmmakers' use of the device change over time? (**Tip:** This topic is for students who want to watch a lot of different movies from one period within the studio era and read about the history of the period.)
- 3) Trace the development of one American film genre during the studio era (1920s-1950s). How did the genre change over time? What are some exemplary developments in the genre? You might focus on the development of just one convention (e.g., the depiction of the Western hero, the convention of "bursting into song" in the musical, political commentary in the social problem film). You must explain the industrial, technological, and/or historical conditions that guided the genre's development during the studio era (For example, how did HUAC stifle the progress of the social problem film?). (**Tip:** This topic is for students who want to get deeply in one genre, watch lots of movies that span the studio era, and read about a genre's development.)

*Optional:* If you wish to write on your own topic, rather than one of the topics above, supply me with a prepared (one paragraph) description in my office hours by *September 26*. Email won't do; we must have a conversation. (This meeting is separate from your conference with me, which will occur later.) Your topic must involve research on American film history during the period of this course. I will decide whether you may write on your own topic based on whether it seems feasible and relevant to the course, and you seem prepared to write about it.

## A) Individual Conference

Sign up for a conference by the due date indicated in the syllabus. Come to your conference with typed answers to the following five questions. Bring two hard copies, one for each of us to take notes on.

1. *Which of the topics above are you writing about?* 1, 2, or 3? Easy.
2. *What specific question is your project answering?* Within the topics listed, you must formulate a specific question to guide your research, something related to the history of American cinema of the period. (Tip: A question ends with a question mark. Don't come in with a thesis.)
3. *Why is your question worth answering?* Justify your question. 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 will you go about finding answers to your question? You need a detailed plan: What movies do you need to 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. *What film history research will you conduct?* In one way or another, every paper for this class must answer the question, "Why did that happen then?" So how will you research the ways in which industry conditions at the time shaped whatever aspect of American cinema you are writing about? How are you going to talk with the past?

### Notes

- Conferences will last 25 minutes.
- Take notes during our conference. A lot is going to happen, and you won't remember it all.
- If at some point you significantly change your topic, you must schedule another conference with me, prepared again with typed answers to the five questions above.
- If you are working in a group, all members must attend the entire conference.

- Checklist:  I have typed hard copies of answers to the 5 questions above, including copies for everyone in my group and my professor.
- I have listed the authors' names at the top of the page
- I am prepared to take notes during the conference.

## B) Abstract, Paper, and List of Works Cited

Your final paper presents your research findings and analysis. It includes the following separate parts:

- 1) *Title Page, Byline, and Abstract.* An abstract briefly summarizes your paper's conclusions (i.e. your thesis).
- 2) *Essay.* A discussion of your findings, organized according to a series of points (supporting theses) with discussions of the evidence in support of the points. Use [MLA in-text citations](#).
- 3) *Works Cited.* A list of all of the print and online resources cited in the paper, organized alphabetically in [MLA format](#); do not include film titles in this list.
- 4) *Filmography* (optional). A list of films cited in the paper with [film reference information](#). Separate your filmography from your Works Cited.

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 your paper up to one week late; however, late papers receive no written comments (there is no other penalty). After a week, your paper loses 1% point for every half-hour it is late.

- Checklist:  Title, byline, and abstract on a separate Title Page
- Essay with [MLA in-text citations](#)
- [Works Cited page in MLA format](#)
- Filmography (if you have one) on a separate page
- Email as MS Word attachment (attachment title starts with your last name, e.g. yourlastname\_paper.docx). Copy your teammates, if you have them.

## SUGGESTED 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).
- Berliner, Todd. *Hollywood Aesthetic: Pleasure in American Cinema* (New York: Oxford UP, 2017).
- Biesen, Sheri Chinen. *Film Censorship: Regulating America's Screen* (New York: Wallflower P, 2018)
- Bordwell, David. *Reinventing Hollywood: How 1940s Filmmakers Changed Movie Storytelling* (Chicago: U Chicago P, 2017)
- 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)
- 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)
- Doherty, Thomas. *Show Trial: Hollywood, HUAC, and the Birth of the Blacklist* (New York: Columbia UP, 2018)
- 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).
- 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)
- Prince, Stephen, ed. *The Horror Film* (Rutgers UP, 2004).
- 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

- [FST 376 Library Resource Page](#)  
The Randall librarians have put together a resource page just for this class.
- [Film Studies Resource Page](#)  
Randall library webpage for film studies.

- [Hollywood, Censorship, and the Motion Picture Production Code, 1927-1968 Database](#)  
See information above.

### WorldCat

To find books on your topic, use [WorldCat.org](#), which seeks to catalogue every book ever written. Once there, select “Books” and type your search words. Use [Randall library](#) and [Interlibrary Loan](#) to obtain whatever books you find listed on WorldCat.

### Interlibrary Loan (ILL)

Every student must sign up for a free [Interlibrary Loan \(ILL\) account](#) through Randall Library. ILL allows you to obtain books, articles, chapters, and films unavailable in Randall. You will need ILL to collect resources for your paper. It can take a week or two to get a book or film, so order early. The library will send you a notice when something you’ve ordered arrives.

### Randall Library Guide to Citation Styles

This webpage provides links that will help you reference sources and create a Works Cited.

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

Since your supporting points 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.
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 is the *result* of your research, not the starting-point. In its final form, the thesis is the *last* thing you come up with before you write your final draft.
4. 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.
5. 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 movie could be said only about that one movie (not many movies).*
6. 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 America’s attitude toward sex in the forties and fifties 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.”)
7. Your thesis must be demonstrable. Your job is not merely to tell your reader what you think: Your job is to use logic and evidence to *persuade* your reader to think what you think.
8. 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?
9. Your thesis should be true. If *you* don’t believe what you’re saying, your reader won’t.
10. Before you hand in your paper, ensure that your thesis statement, as well as each of your supporting points, is a statement to be demonstrated (i.e. a conclusion) that is clear, specific, demonstrable, not obvious, and true. If so, then your points are in good shape.