

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS
FST 377 AMERICAN CINEMA SINCE 1961

PROFESSOR TODD BERLINER

SPRING 2020

GENERAL INSTRUCTIONS

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

Prepare your papers and Works Cited pages in MLA style using in-text citation for all quoted, paraphrased, and summarized information. The Purdue Online Writing Lab explains [MLA style](#) and provides examples.

On the Canvas page 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 and don't use OneDrive) by the due date indicated in the course schedule. The title of your document 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.

CRITICAL RECEPTION REPORT AND WORKS CITED

Locate several reviews of an American film (one you have seen) released between 1961 and 1980, and write a brief report (2 pages or so, plus a Works Cited page) that summarizes the critical reception of the film at the time of its release. Your report will explain how film reviewers responded to the film immediately after it was released theatrically. This assignment is designed to give you experience dealing with primary texts (movie reviews) and explaining historical events to readers unfamiliar with them.

Cite at least eight reviews of an average earner and twelve or more if your film was a blockbuster (among the top ten grossers of the year); blockbusters get more reviews, so you must synthesize more of them to give an accurate sense of a blockbuster's critical reception. Do not include recent reviews, only reviews from the period of your film's original theatrical release (within a year, say, of the release date). Do not review the movie yourself. Instead, write an historical report on the reviews the film received then.

For help finding reviews, start with [Randall Library's website devoted to this course](#), which has a section on finding film reviews. You might also consult the reference librarians in Randall library. Eventually, you are liable to exhaust online databases and will have to search for reviews among Randall's "bound periodicals" and microfilm. Look for reviews in the *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Variety*, *Hollywood Reporter*, *Boston Globe*, *Chicago Sun-Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *Film Quarterly*, *America*, *New Republic*, *National Review*, *Washington Post*, *The Nation*, *Atlanta Constitution*, *Globe and Mail*, *San Francisco Examiner*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, *Village Voice*, *New York Daily News*, *Newsweek*, *Time*, *Independent Film Journal*, *People*, *Cinéaste*, *The Spectator*, *Sight and Sound*, *Literature-Film Quarterly*, *Newsday*, and *The Guardian*.

Synthesize the information for your reader. What did reviewers agree or disagree about? Organize your report *point-by-point* (not review-by-review): Explain the main issues that reviewers remarked on, working on one point at a time and citing individual reviews as support: One point per paragraph.

In your first paragraph, starting with the very first sentence of your report, provide an overview of the film's critical reception (not an overview of the film's plot, awards it received, nor your opinion of it). For example: "*Annie Hall* (1977) received almost universally positive reviews upon its release. Reviewers praised not only its humor but also its tenderness and insight into romantic relationships, as well as commending director Woody Allen's growing maturity as a filmmaker."

You may turn in your report late. Any excuse for an extension will be accepted, no matter how improbable, 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 (there is no other penalty), but I'll give you verbal feedback if you bring your paper to my office hours.

Provide a "Works Cited" page, in MLA format, of all of the reviews you cite in your report. I want the *original* reference, not a URL. Use the MLA format *specifically* tailored to reviews, which may be found at the Purdue Online Writing Lab [here](#). Scroll to the section titled, "A Review." Sample reference:

Canby, Vincent. "Allen at His Best." Review of *Annie Hall*, directed by Woody Allen. *New York Times*, 21 Apr. 1977, p. E1.

- Checklist: — First paragraph summarizes the critical reception of the film.
— Cite at least 8 reviews (12 or more for blockbusters), all written within a year of the film's initial release
— [MLA in-text citations](#) in the body of the paper
— [Works Cited page in the MLA format](#) for movie reviews (including date of the initial Review, no URLs)
— Email as MS Word attachment (document title starts with your last name, e.g. "yourlastname_TheShining.docx"). Don't send it through OneDrive.

FILM HISTORY PROJECT

Students will complete the following 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, Film History 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. If you collaborate, come as a group to your conference and submit one copy of your final paper with all of the authors' names. 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 prompts:

- 1) Examine the controversial production and/or reception history of a controversial American film released between 1961 and 2000. Controversial films caused public disagreement or moral condemnation in an unusually vehement way. You know a film is controversial when the arguments extend beyond movie reviews into the culture at large. You will examine historical evidence from the period of the film's release—primary sources, such as reviews, editorials, newspaper articles, the film's CARA rating history or distribution history, box office statistics, trade journal reports, or other evidence from the period—in order to demonstrate how the controversy was expressed at the time. And you will examine the film itself, analyzing those elements that caused controversy and situating them within film history. Some examples of controversial films include *Lolita* (1962), *Midnight Cowboy* (1969), *Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song* (1971), *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), *Deep Throat* (1972), *Pink Flamingos* (1972), *The Exorcist* (1973), *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978), *The Warriors* (1979), *Cruising* (1980), *Heaven's Gate* (1980), *Brazil* (1985), *Blue Velvet* (1986), *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), *Do the Right Thing* (1989), and *Thelma and Louise* (1991), but feel free to pick another controversial film. (**Tip:** Your primary research task is to *find the controversy*: look into the past to find upset, offended, or angry people).
- 2) Pick an American independent filmmaker working in the 1980s/1990s (AKA, the "Sundance-Miramax era") and examine his or her films in light of independent filmmaking practices (financing, production, distribution, or exhibition practices) of that time. What trends (industrial, genre, stylistic, narrative, or thematic trends) does your filmmaker participate in? How did your filmmaker obtain financing and distribution? What industrial conditions influenced the subject and form of the films? (**Tip:** Don't write an auteurist analysis of your filmmaker. This is a paper about the relationship between your filmmaker and industry trends, conditions, and indie infrastructure of the period.)
- 3) Select a distinct stylistic or narrative device in American cinema of the last 50 years (e.g. Steadicam practices, alternative-future narratives, morphing, unreliable narration, twist films, puzzle films, whatever you want), and trace its development. How and why did the device develop? What are the studio-era precedents for the device? What accounts for its emergence, development, or popularity at a given time? Did technological advances make it possible? How did industry or technology changes affect its prevalence? How has the use of the device changed over time? What are some of its exemplary instances? (**Tip:** This assignment is for students who want to watch a *lot* of movies.)

Optional: If you wish to write on your own topic, rather than on one of the topics above, supply me with a prepared (one paragraph) description in my office hours by *February 19*. 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. 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

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 three topics above are you writing about?* Topic 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 kinds of 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. *What film history research will you conduct?* In one way or another, every project 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 you later change your topic, you must schedule another conference, 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) *Cover Page.* This page includes the essay title, your name, date, and your abstract. An abstract 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 citation format](#).
- 3) *Works Cited.* A list of all of the print and online resources cited in the paper, organized alphabetically in [MLA Works Cited format](#); do not include film titles in this list.
- 4) *Filmography.* A list of films cited in the paper with appropriate 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: Cover Page: essay title, your name, date, and abstract
 Essay with [MLA in-text citations](#)
 [Works Cited page in MLA format](#)
 Filmography 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.

RESOURCES FOR RESEARCH

Books

- 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)
- Buckland, Warren. *Directed by Steven Spielberg: Poetics of the Contemporary Hollywood Blockbuster*. New York: Continuum Press, 2006.
- 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).
- Hiller, Jim. *American Independent Cinema: A Sight and Sound Reader* (London: BFI, 2001)
- Holmlund, Chris and Justin Wyatt. *Contemporary American Independent Film: From the Margins to the Mainstream*, ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2005)
- King, Geoff. *American Independent Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005)
- King, Geoff. *Indiewood, USA: Where Hollywood Meets Independent Cinema* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2009)
- King, Geoff. *New Hollywood Cinema: An Introduction* (New York: Columbia UP, 2002).
- King, Geoff, Claire Malloy, and Yannis Tzioumakis, ed. *American Independent Cinema: Indie, Indiewood, and Beyond* (London and New York: Routledge, 2013)
- 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).
- Merritt, Greg. *Celluloid Mavericks: A History of American Independent Film* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 2000)
- 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).
- Newman, Michael Z. *Indie: An American Film Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011)
- Phillips, Kendall. *Controversial Cinema: The Films That Outraged America* (New York: Praeger, 2008)
- Pribram, E. Deidre. *Cinema & Culture: Independent Film in the United States, 1980-2001* (New York: Peter Lang, 2002)
- 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).
- Tzioumakis, Yannis. *American Independent Cinema: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006)
- Wasser, Frederick. *Veni, Vidi, Video: The Hollywood Empire and the VCR* (Austin: U Texas P, 2001).

Databases

- [EST 377 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.

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 the books you find 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

Since the supporting points of your final paper should also be theses, these ten 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. 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.”)
5. 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.
6. 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 (or group of movies) could be said only about that one movie (or group of movies).*
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 project, 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.