

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS
FST 496 SENIOR SEMINAR IN FILM STUDIES
NEW APPROACHES TO FILM AESTHETICS

Professor Todd Berliner

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READING SUMMARIES

At the very beginning of every class with an assigned reading, students will submit, by hard-copy, a summary of the reading due that day. Approximately one to two double-spaced typed pages, a summary condenses and distills the author's main points. Summaries are designed to ensure that you are prepared to discuss the readings, that you are understanding what you read, and that you practice writing clear, cogent, organized, grammatically correct prose. They also help develop the important 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 a 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. Don't write, "The author says"; just write what the author says ("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. Your first paragraph should explain the author's main argument (the overarching point or points of the reading), not necessarily the author's first point. Each subsequent paragraph should explain one of the author's chief points. One paragraph = one point. Sentences should move logically from one to the next.

Don't quote entire sentences. Instead, weave pertinent shorter quotations/phrases from the reading into your own sentences. When you quote, put the page number(s) in parentheses at the end of your sentence, [MLA style](#).

Summaries cannot be made up or turned in late. If you miss a summary, 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 one or two *questions* that will provoke fruitful class discussions about the reading. Ask a question that the class can answer (not a question for the professor), such as a question about a confusing passage or point in the reading, the relation between the reading and whatever film we are studying that week, a point in the reading that you disagreed with, or the relation between the week's reading and an earlier reading. Ask about something that you yourself want to talk about with the class. Students should be prepared to start the discussions about their own discussion questions.

Checklist:

- first paragraph summarizes the reading's main points
- subsequent paragraphs summarize the author's key points from all parts of the reading, one point per paragraph
- 1-2 pages (approximately)
- typed / double-spaced / printed hard copy
- includes 1 or 2 discussion questions at the end (a question for the class, not the professor)
- complete, clear, logically organized, grammatically correct sentences.

Extra Credit

Within a week of receiving back a graded reading summary, you may revise your summary, addressing the issues indicated in my comments on the first version. In order to earn a better grade, your revision must address not just easily fixed issues but also any problems with organization, syntax, clarity, or mischaracterizations of the author's argument. I will average the original grade and the new one. You must submit the first version (*including* my comments) with the revision.

AESTHETIC ANALYSIS PAPER ASSIGNMENTS

Students will complete a series of assignments that culminates in a polished essay that contributes something new to our understanding of a film's aesthetic properties:

- A) Prospectus, Working Bibliography, and Filmography
- B) Aesthetic Analysis Paper
- C) Aesthetic Analysis Paper (revised)

Prompt: Conduct an aesthetic film analysis—of a film we have seen in this class—that integrates two or more of the approaches that we have studied (philosophical, psychological, neoformalist, or historical). You may select a film that you are also presenting on.

Your paper will probably take one of the following two forms:

- 1) *This Movie is Unique/Unusual*
This type of paper demonstrates that a film we have seen has unique or unusual aesthetic properties, when examined according to aesthetic approaches we have studied in this class.
- 2) *This Movie is Representative of Many Movies*
Employing aesthetic approaches studied in this class, this type of paper uses one of the films we have seen as a case study to explain aesthetic properties found in many films.

You may collaborate, in pairs, on these assignments. If you collaborate, submit one copy of each assignment.

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

To write an original essay, you must know some of what has been written about your topic. Depending on which aesthetic approaches you choose, you will need to consult philosophical, psychological, historical, or other relevant scholarship—books, articles, movies, and other materials (such as movie reviews and interviews) outside of those assigned in class. But I don't want book reports. The background research you conduct is *merely* background: Familiarize yourself with some of the scholarship relevant to your topic so that you write an aesthetic film analysis that is valid, insightful, informed, and original.

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, Working Bibliography, and Filmography

A *prospectus* is a written proposal (maybe 400-600 words) for your research project. In it, you identify:

1. *A question* pertinent to the aesthetics of your film;
2. *Why the question is of interest and worth researching*. Justify your question. Don't tell readers why you want to write about the topic; nobody cares. Instead, 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*. Lay out a specific plan for how you will answer your question, identifying areas of existing research that can help answer it. Your methodology must make use of two or more of the approaches to film aesthetics that we have studied in this class, so explain which approaches will you be employing in your paper. How will they help you answer your questions? Do you need to watch any other movies? What will you look for in your movie or movies? What kinds of texts will you read and what will you look for in those texts? How will those movies and texts help you answer your questions?

A bibliography is a comprehensive list of articles, books, book chapters, movie reviews, etc. pertaining to the topic you are writing about. Avoid websites that do not have a proven history of valid scholarship. Use reliable, appropriate sources. Put film titles in a "filmography," separate from written resources. Use [MLA style for Works Cited pages](#).

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 15-20 minutes each. The writer will take notes on the discussion, without participating, so write your prospectus in such a way that it requires no explanation. You should make your work as specific and thorough as possible so that the class may offer criticism and suggestions that will help you complete your project successfully.

Optional conference with Professor Berliner: I suggest making a 20-minute appointment with me a week or so before your prospectus workshop to review your prospectus or discuss your project. Students have found this conference helps make their workshops more productive.

Checklist: = prospectus (400-600 words) with a (1) question, (2) justification, and (3) methodology.
 = bibliography in [MLA style](#)
 = separate filmography in [MLA style for films](#)
 = bring 16 typed/double spaced hard copies of everything to your workshop

B) Aesthetic Analysis Paper

Your paper presents your research findings and analysis and includes:

- 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 citations](#).
- 3) *Works Cited*. A list of all of the print and online resources cited in the paper, organized alphabetically in [MLA style](#); 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. Use [MLA style for films](#).

Although you will revise this paper later, the first version is not a “rough draft.” Submit a polished paper, your best work.

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 the extension lasts only one week past the due date. After a week, I deduct 1% every half-hour it is late.

Submit the paper as an email attachment (MS Word documents only and don't use OneDrive). The title of your document should start with your last name (“yourlastname_paper.docx”). I will comment on your work using the “track changes” feature in MS Word and email the document back to you. If you are working with a partner, be sure to copy your partner when you email the paper to me.

Checklist: = Title, your name, date, and abstract on a separate Cover Page
 = Essay with [MLA in-text citations](#)
 = [Works Cited page in MLA format](#)
 = Filmography on a separate page in [MLA style for films](#)
 = Email as an MS Word attachment (yourlastname_paper.docx). Don't use One Drive. Copy your partner, if you have one.

C) Aesthetic Analysis Paper (revised)

Your final paper may be quite different from the version you turned in earlier. I assume that you will change your points after you receive my comments and continue to research, analyze, 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—don't use OneDrive). The title of your document should start with your last name (“yourlastname_paper.docx”). If you are working with someone else, copy your partner when you email the paper to me. Final papers receive no comments, just grades, and there are no extensions; I will deduct 1% every half-hour it is late.

Checklist: = Title, your name, date, and abstract on a separate Cover Page
 = Essay with [MLA in-text citations](#)
 = [Works Cited page in MLA format](#)
 = Filmography on a separate page in [MLA style for films](#)
 = Email as an MS Word attachment (yourlastname_paper.docx). Don't use One Drive. Copy your partner, if you have one.