

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS
FST 376 AMERICAN CINEMA 1927-1960

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GENERAL INSTRUCTIONS

Cite 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 on your writing:

- 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 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

Write a brief report (2-4 pages) on the correspondence between a film studio and film regulators concerning one American film released between 1927 and 1960 (except for *Confessions of a Nazi Spy* because of the sample paper on Canvas). The assignment will give you experience conducting archival research, dealing with primary sources, 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 (except for 1939's *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*).
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. It is in the [Hollywood, Censorship, and the Motion Picture Production Code, 1927-1968 Database](#).
5. Regulators had significant concerns about its content.

To obtain the correspondence about your movie, you will access the [Hollywood, Censorship, and the Motion Picture Production Code, 1927-1968 Database](#), available in Randall Library's catalogue. This electronic database contains archival letters between studios and film regulators—a small selection scanned from the collection of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences' Margaret Herrick Library—concerning morally objectionable material in 500 American films. (Ignore any movie reviews in the file on your movie; focus on industry correspondence about moral regulation.)

To access the database, click [here](#). To look for a specific film, enter the title into the search box. To scroll through a list of films in the database, click "View All Documents"; sort by title or date. Download a PDF of all of the correspondence about a film by clicking the download icon ( Download) at the top of the page.

After analyzing the database's documents on your film, report on the correspondence between regulators and the studio, explaining the objections, the changes requested, and any studio response (if available).

Organize your report as follows:

- *Introductory paragraph*. Quickly summarize the correspondence, including the timeframe, participants, the film discussed (including date of release), the studio involved, and the main areas of concern. Be specific.
- *Subsequent paragraphs*. Synthesize the main concerns of the regulators (sometimes identified in correspondence as "Will H. Hays," "Joseph I. Breen" or "Geoffrey M. Shurlock") and any directives to the filmmakers. Refer to specific letters by date, writer, and recipient, and, when mentioning people for the first time, identify them by name and organization (e.g. "On June 6, 1941, in a letter to Jack Warner of Warner Bros., Joseph Breen of the Production Code Administration complains about Joel Cairo's characterization as a 'pansy type.'").
- *Organization*. Organize your report 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.
- *Works Cited*. For the MLA citation of the database file on your film, click the cite icon ( Cite).

You may turn in your report late. Any request for an extension will be granted, no matter how improbable the excuse, up to one week past the due date. Work that is late (up to a week past the due date) will receive no written feedback (there is no other penalty); I'll give you verbal feedback if you bring your paper to my office hours. After a week, your paper loses 1% point for every half-hour it is late.

- Checklist:
- All referenced letters are indicated within the paper by sender, recipient, and date.
 - Works Cited page at the end identifies the database file on your film.
 - Email as MS Word attachment (Don't send it through OneDrive). Attachment title starts with your last name (e.g. yourlastname_MalteseFalcon.docx).

FILM HISTORY RESEARCH PROJECT

Students will complete the following series of assignments:

- A) Individual Conference with Professor Berliner in which you identify a film history 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 and the historical context surrounding your film. You must therefore consult scholarly books and articles, films, and any other relevant 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. 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. 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) **Regulating Film Content.** 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, Biblical epics, 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*, study the correspondence between film regulators and studios about your films. In addition, 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 Production Code archives and compare correspondence on film scripts to the films themselves.)
- 2) **One Device-One Period.** Examine a single stylistic or narrative device from one period within the studio era (I hope you pick your own device, but here are some examples: devices for integrating sound during the 1927-1931 period; multiple-protagonist 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? How did filmmakers employ it creatively and in different ways? 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? (*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 that period.)
- 3) **Genre Evolution.** 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 depiction of Black people in race films, the convention of "bursting into song" in the musical, social commentary in the social problem film). Your paper will explain the industrial, technological, and/or historical conditions that guided the genre's development during the studio era (For example, how did HUAC affect the development of the social problem film?). (*Tip:* This topic is for students who want to go deeply into one genre, watch lots of movies that span the studio era, and read about a genre's development.)

A) Individual Conference

On Canvas, sign up for a Zoom conference by the due date indicated in the syllabus. Before your conference, email me an MS Word attachment with written answers to the following five questions; put your name(s) at the top of the page.

1. Which **topic** above are you writing about? (1) Regulating Film Content, (2) One Device-One Period, or (3) Genre Evolution?
2. What **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. What's your **justification** for your project? Why is your question worth answering? Don't explain 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 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? Every paper must answer the question, "Why did that happen then?" How will you research the ways in which conditions at the time shaped whatever aspect of American cinema you are writing about? How will you 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: Emailed typed answers (MS Word attachment) to 5 questions before my conference
 Listed the authors' names at the top of the page
 Prepared to take notes during the conference.

Notes on Justifications (for question 3 above)

The purpose of academic writing is to create new knowledge and clear up misunderstandings in the way people think about something. Hence, a justification in academic writing highlights a problem, confusion, misunderstanding, or gap in the existing knowledge. Your justification motivates your project by explaining how it challenges current thinking.

What follows are some common types of justifications in academic writing:

- The truth isn't what one would expect or what it might appear to be.
- Knowledge on the topic has heretofore been limited, but new information or a new approach better illuminates the topic.
- There's a mystery or inconsistency here that needs addressing.
- Published views of the matter conflict.
- We can learn something new about a larger phenomenon by studying this smaller one.
- This seemingly tangential or insignificant matter is key to understanding something.
- The standard opinion needs challenging or qualifying.

Your justification is not something you add to your paper; rather, it's deeply embedded in the entire argument. You cannot write the paper unless you know beforehand why it's worth writing. Indeed, the structure of your paper and your approach to the project should focus on demonstrating your argument in light of the new knowledge or misunderstanding expressed in your justification.

B) Abstract, Paper, and List of Works Cited

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

- 1) *Title Page*. Includes your name, date, course number, essay title, and an abstract.
- 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 sources cited in the paper, organized alphabetically in [MLA format for Works Cited](#); do not include film titles in this list.
- 4) *Filmography*. 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 Page: essay title, your name, date, and abstract.
 - Essay with [MLA in-text citations](#)
 - [Works Cited page in MLA Style for Formatting Sources at the End of Your Paper](#)
 - Filmography on a separate page using [MLA Style for film](#)
 - Email as MS Word attachment (attachment title starts with your last name, e.g. yourlastname_paper.docx). Copy your teammates, if you have them.

Notes on Abstracts and Thesis Statements

An *abstract* is a summary paragraph, detached from the essay, that states your paper's thesis and summarizes your paper's entire argument but without the evidence or rhetoric. (See sample papers on Canvas for examples.)

A *thesis statement* is a statement you intend to demonstrate; it encapsulates your paper's points. Your thesis statement is the result of your research, not the starting-point. Your thesis briefly and explicitly states your paper's conclusion. In its final form, the thesis statement is the last thing you come up with before you write your final draft.

A strong thesis statement is...

1. *Clear*. Your thesis should make complete sense to readers on its own. The rest of the paper will set about *persuading* readers of your thesis, but readers should *understand* the paper's thesis without reading anything but the thesis.
2. *Specific*. Ensure that what you say in your thesis about your movie (or group of movies, or filmmaker, etc.), could be said only about that one movie (or group of movies, filmmaker, etc.). If your thesis could apply to many other things (other films, other filmmakers, other genres, other periods in cinema, etc.), then it's not specific enough.
3. *Demonstrable*. Your job is not merely to tell your reader what you believe: You must be able to marshal *reasons* (logic and evidence) to persuade your reader to believe what you believe.
4. *Not obvious*. If we already believe your thesis before we read your paper, what's the point of reading (or writing) the paper? Your paper must offer us greater understanding of something.
5. *True*. If you don't believe what you're saying, your reader certainly won't.
6. *Concise*. Your thesis should include no more words and information than is necessary to convey your point clearly. That said, theses can be multiple sentences; they might comprise an entire paragraph. The length depends on how much you have to say and how efficiently you say it.
7. *Complex*. A strong thesis typically has several parts to it. It is complex enough to sustain a paper, requiring evidence and argumentation in order to demonstrate. Although each of your supporting points may be simple individually, the paper's overall thesis should typically be complex, since it encapsulates all of your paper's points.

SUGGESTED SOURCES 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, 1985)
- 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.