

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS
FST 496/569 SENIOR SEMINAR IN FILM STUDIES
APPROACHES TO FILM AESTHETICS

Professor Todd Berliner

Spring 2021

READING SUMMARIES

Purpose: To be challenged by sometimes difficult and unfamiliar scholarship from multiple disciplines and, through effort, figure out an author's claims so that you may assess them critically.

- *Knowledge:* Successfully doing all of these assignments will enable you to better understand and be prepared to discuss each of the course readings.
- *Skills:* Successfully doing all of these assignments will enable you to:
 1. Write clear, cogent, organized, grammatically correct prose;
 2. Fairly and concisely explain someone else's argument;
 3. Ask questions that critically probe an author's claims.

Tasks: At the very beginning of every class with an assigned reading, submit, by hard-copy, a summary of the reading due that day.

1. One to two double-spaced typed pages, your summary paraphrases (puts in your own words) the author's main points, condensing and distilling all portions of the reading. I don't want a blow-by-blow of the article, nor a summary of the topics of the article, nor your opinion of the article. Instead, summarize the author's points as though *you* were the author. *Write your summaries so that the authors themselves would agree with what you have written.*
2. Organize your summary. Your first paragraph should explain the author's main point, 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.
3. Rather than quoting entire sentences, weave pertinent shorter phrases from the reading into your own sentences. When you quote, put the page numbers in parentheses at the end of your sentence, [MLA style](#).
4. 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 or interesting passage, a point you want to challenge, or the relation of the reading to whatever film we are studying or to an earlier reading. Ask about something that you want to talk about with the class, and be prepared to start the discussion yourself.
5. Summaries cannot be made up or turned in late. If you miss one, you will get a zero on it; however, I will drop your four lowest scores. If 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—by email as an MS Word attachment.

Criteria for Success:

1. The paper offers a concise, specific, and valid summary of the author's main points.
2. The prose is clear, cogent, organized and grammatically correct.
3. The student offers one or two thoughtful questions to provoke class discussion.

See samples on Canvas of successful readings summaries.

- Checklist:**
- first paragraph summarizes the reading's main point
 - subsequent paragraphs summarize the author's key points, 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)

Extra Credit (Revision): 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. To improve your grade, your revision must address not just easily fixed issues but also problems with organization, syntax, clarity, or mischaracterizations of the author's argument. I will average the original grade and the new one. Submit the first version (including my comments) with your revision.

AESTHETIC ANALYSIS PAPER ASSIGNMENTS

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).

Purpose:

- *Knowledge:* Successfully doing these assignments will enable you to understand the reasons for a film's aesthetic value.
- *Skills:* Successfully doing these assignments will enable you to:
 1. Make a reasonable plan and a defensible proposal for conducting research.
 2. Conduct an original aesthetic film analysis.
 3. Use research and writing skills to make a clearly articulated, valid, and persuasive argument.
 4. Revise your writing to improve clarity, logic, grammar, organization, and argumentation.

Tasks: Students will complete a series of three assignments that culminates in a polished essay that contributes something new to our understanding of a film's aesthetic properties. See descriptions of each assignment below.

1. Prospectus, Working Bibliography, and Filmography
2. Aesthetic Analysis Paper
3. Aesthetic Analysis Paper (revised)

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

1. *This movie is unusual.* This type of paper demonstrates that a movie has unusual aesthetic properties that help account for its artistic value.
2. *This movie is representative of many movies.* This type of paper uses a movie as a case study to explain aesthetic properties found in many movies.

Additional Instructions:

1. You may collaborate in pairs on these assignments. Submit one joint copy of each assignment.
2. You may select a film that you are also presenting on.
3. Prepare your papers, works cited, bibliography, and filmography 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.
4. 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 relevant material—scholarly books and articles, movies, and perhaps other materials, such as movie reviews and interviews—including both materials assigned in class and materials that were not. 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 conduct an aesthetic analysis that is valid, informed, and original.

Tips:

- 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?*
- The target audience for your paper is someone who has thought about your topic and wants to learn more about it, someone like your professor, who, by a stroke of good fortune, happens to be your real audience. Even better, think of the students in this class as your audience; if your papers are good, they will be.
- 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 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.

Prospectus, Working Bibliography, and Filmography

Purpose: To develop a reasonable plan and a defensible proposal for conducting research for your paper.

Tasks: On the date indicated in the syllabus, each student will bring to class 16 copies of a 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.

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

1. A *research question* pertinent to the prompt. What question will your paper answer? (Tip: A question ends with a question mark. Don't come in with a thesis.)
2. A *justification for your project*. Why is your question of interest and worth researching? Don't tell readers why you want to write about the topic; nobody cares. Instead, explain why readers should want to read your paper. Explain how your approach to the topic will reveal something readers will want to know.
3. *Your methodology*. Lay out a specific plan for answering your question, identifying areas of research that will help you answer it. This part of your prospectus answers the following questions:
 - 1) Which approaches will you be employing in your paper? How will your approaches help you answer your research question?
 - 2) What research must you do to answer your question? How will you analyze your movie? Do you need to analyze any other 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 research question?

A *bibliography* is a comprehensive list of articles, books, book chapters, movie reviews, interviews, and other reading materials pertaining to the topic you are writing about. Use reliable, appropriate sources. List print resources and websites that have a proven history of presenting peer-reviewed scholarship or other valid information. Put film titles in a separate *filmography*. Use [MLA Style for Works Cited](#).

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

Criteria for Success:

1. The prospectus poses a research question, explains persuasively why the question is worth answering, and lays out a reasonable method for answering it.
2. The bibliography includes the written material the author must read to answer his/her question, including scholarship from two of the approaches we have studied in class (philosophy, psychology, neoformalism, film history).
3. The filmography lists the movies the author must watch to answer his/her question.

See samples on Canvas of successful prospectuses.

- Checklist:**
- Prospectus (400-600 words) with a (1) question, (2) justification, and (3) methodology.
 - Bibliography in [MLA Style for Formatting Sources at the End of Your Paper](#)
 - Separate Filmography using [MLA Style for film](#)
 - Bring 16 typed/double spaced hard copies of everything to your workshop

Aesthetic Analysis Paper

Purpose: Conduct an original aesthetic film analysis, using at least two of the approaches studied in class, that answers a justifiable research question in light of earlier research on the topic.

Tasks: Your 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. An abstract is a paragraph, detached from the essay itself, that summarizes your paper's conclusions (i.e. your thesis) and lays out your entire argument in abstract form (i.e. without rhetoric or evidence).
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 for Works Cited](#); do not include film titles in this list.
4. *Filmography.* An alphabetical list of films cited in the paper with appropriate reference information. Separate your Filmography from your Works Cited. Use [MLA Style for films](#).

Additional Instructions:

1. Although you will revise this paper later, your first submission is not a "rough draft." Submit a polished paper, your best work.
2. The length of your paper depends on how much you have to say and how efficient you are in saying it.
3. 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.
4. Submit the paper as an email attachment (MS Word documents only, and do not submit through 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.

Criteria for Success:

1. The paper has a strong justification.
2. The paper incorporates research from at least two of the approaches studied in this class (philosophy, psychology, neoformalism, film history).
3. The prose is clear, cogent, organized and grammatically correct.
4. *Graduate students* are expected to thoroughly situate their arguments within existing research, including any scholarship on the film they are writing about, as well as scholarship on the approaches (philosophical, psychological, neoformalist, or historical) they are taking to their aesthetic analysis. The paper reviews existing research on the topic and explains the paper's contribution to it.

See samples on Canvas of successful papers.

- Checklist:**
- Title Page with your name, date, and course number, then the paper title and paper 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 in [MLA Style for films](#)
 - Email as an MS Word attachment (yourlastname_paper.docx). Don't submit through OneDrive. Copy your partner, if you have one.

Aesthetic Analysis Paper (Revised)

Purpose: To learn the benefits of a thorough, tenacious revision and scrupulous attention to one's prose and argumentation.

Tasks: Revise your paper in light of weaknesses in the original submitted version.

1. 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, think, and revise. I'm looking to see how much you have rethought and reworked your paper; I'm looking for improvement.
2. Submit the paper as an email attachment (MS Word documents only; don't submit through OneDrive). The title of your document should start with your last name ("yourlastname_revision.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.

Criteria for Success are the same as they were for the original paper, with the following addition, which will account for about half of the paper's grade:

1. The writer has rethought and revised the paper to make it significantly stronger overall in light of weaknesses in the grammar, organization, writing style, and formatting and has strengthened the logic, supportive evidence, and method of argument where needed.

Checklist:

- Title Page with your name, date, and course number, then the paper title and paper 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 in [MLA style for films](#)
- Email as an MS Word attachment (yourlastname_revision.docx). Don't submit through OneDrive. Copy your partner, if you have one.