How to Write About Film: The Movie Review, The Theoretical Essay, and The Critical Essay

The Movie Review
The movie review is the most popular form of film analysis. Movie reviews often appear in newspapers and are tailored for the widest possible audiences, generally, to recommend or discourage the viewing of a film. Unless otherwise directed, writing about film in higher education strays away from the movie review.

The Theoretical Essay
The theoretical essay can discuss “the relation of film and reality, on the political or ideological foundations of the movie industry, or on how film narrative is unlike literary narrative” (Corrigan 11). The theoretical essay generally requires that the writer has a good understanding of film history, film theory, or filmic technicalities. Typically these essays attempt to explain “some of the larger and more complex structures of the cinema and how we understand them” (11). The essays that you submit for your film classes may be highly theoretical, but more often, they are a combination of the theoretical essay and the critical essay.

The Critical Essay
Within the critical essay, you may want to discuss “key themes and elements of the plot, but a lengthy retelling of the story of the of the film is neither needed or acceptable” (Corrigan 13). Instead, you want to focus on the subtleties or complexities of the film that may have eluded you during the first screening. A good critical essay will focus on a specific sequence, character, or a technical choice of the director or cinematographer and analyze HOW one or all of those factors contribute to your interpretation of the film.

Film essays either need to be critical or theoretical.

Writing about film may start with your personal reaction, but it is imperative that you incorporate other aspects of the film such as, “its place in film history, its cultural background, and its formal strategies” (Corrigan 17) to produce dynamic and original analysis.

A Short Guide to Writing About Film by Timothy Corrigan, and Reading in the Dark: Using Film as a Tool in the English Classroom by John Golden referenced
TECHNICAL FILM TERMINOLOGY
[ask how each of these choices/effects contribute to the film's composition]

**THEMES**: Deals with representation, including the film’s topic and characters.

**NARRATIVE**: The narrative is divided into two parts – the story and the plot.

**THE STORY**: All of the events that are presented to the viewer.

**THE PLOT**: The arrangement of those events in a certain order.

**CHARACTERS**: Actors play different roles in films as major and minor characters.

**POINT OF VIEW**: Involves promoting perspective via the camera’s focus/angle.

**MISE-EN-SCENE**: A French term that roughly translates to “what is put in the scene” (Golden 51). The scene is the setting, which is either on site or in a studio.


**THE SHOT**: A single image on the screen before a cut to another image.

**FRAMING**: How the object(s) – (Characters included) is/are positioned within a shot.

**LONG SHOT**: Objects appear smaller as if the viewer is at a distance. Often emphasizes distance and/or uncertainty.

**CLOSE-UP OR CLOSE SHOT**: Object or subject takes up about 80 percent of frame.

**MEDIUM SHOT**: In between the previous two. Typically shot is waist up; human may take up about half the screen space.

**FOCUS**: Shots can be crisp or blurry. Consider why a specific focus is chosen.

**SOFT FOCUS**: A shot that is slightly out of focus – blurry images = disorientation.

**RACK FOCUS**: One image goes out of focus and another comes into focus.

**DEEP FOCUS**: Objects in the background and the foreground are both in focus.

**LOW ANGLE**: Camera is below subject aimed upward. Typically implies strength and power.

**HIGH ANGLE**: Camera is above the subject. Implies weakness, submissiveness, and powerlessness.

**DUTCH ANGLE**: Aka as “canted,” the Dutch angle positions the camera at a 45-degree angle to show a slanted shot.

**THE PAN**: The pan is when the camera pivots/moves along the horizontal axis.

**THE TILT**: Camera pivots/moves along the vertical axis.

**ZOOM**: “The focal length of the lens changes, thus making the object appear to move closer or further away” (Golden 13).

**TRACKING/DOLLY SHOTS**: Anytime the camera is moving, but the focal length of lens remains the same.

**DIEGETIC SOUND**: Sound comes from within the film. In other words, it is the real world noise within the film.

**NONDIEGETIC SOUND**: Sound intended for the audience. Scores, music, and sound effects are all nondiegetic.

**THE FADE**: Image slowly dissolves to black. Suggests transition or time passing.

**THE DISSOLVE**: Two pictures are blended.

**THE CROSSCUT**: Parallel editing. Events occurring in different places happening at the same time.

**HIGH-KEY LIGHTING**: Everything is illuminated. Bright. Lacks shadows.

**LOW-KEY LIGHTING**: “Darkness, shadows, and patches of bright key light” (Golden 16).

**NEUTRAL LIGHTING**: In between.

**FRONT LIGHTING**: Hard light in front of actor or object. No shadows.

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