

# WRITING ABOUT FILM IN NON-FILM COURSES

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Over a number of years of teaching film only in film courses where students learn a specialized vocabulary to analyze films, I had simply forgotten that film, like everything else, can simply be talked about intelligently and therefore written about by the uninitiated. I had forgotten that fact until a beleaguered colleague of mine teaching a Mass Communications course arrived in my office panicked. She was teaching a two-week unit on film in this course and had invited another colleague of ours to come in and talk about film language. The guest lecture had been a crash course in the specialized jargon that it takes most students a couple of months of coaching, instruction, viewing, and writing to use well. My colleague in Communications had given her class an assignment to write a paper on *Body Heat*, a film in the local theaters at the time; but now the class had been terrorized by the guest lecturer into believing that film can only be talked about by identifying low angle shots, high contrast lighting, and Dutch tilts. I faced a simple fact then: the terms weren't necessary. Films can be used as objects of analysis for writing assignments in classes of all sorts. And they are particularly effective because they are naively loved.

In the incident I describe above, my colleague and I sat down together and talked (without terms) about the film and about what she wanted her class to learn from the assignment. Then I jotted down some questions that she could use to guide her class. These ask students to look at the film as a film rather than as an illustrated plot. My purpose was to preserve some sense that film is, in the largest sense, "spatial," that even sounds (dialogue, sound effects, and the musical score) correspond to or counterpoint distances. Erwin Panofsky defines the special possibilities of the film medium as a dynamization of space and spatialization of time. These were some of the questions that forced her students to look closely at film and to make their tipsy scribbles in the dark that some of us call "notes":

1. Is the screen crowded in a particular scene with objects or characters or does it give a sense of space?

2. Does the space in a particular scene seem to extend deep into the background or is it shallow like a stage?
3. How does the director show conversation or interaction between characters? Do both or all characters appear together on the screen at the same time or is just one shown at a time?
4. Is one character or object emphasized more than another? How is this done? Is the character seen from close-up? Is the character seen for fairly long stretches?
5. Do you ever view the scene from above or below it?
6. Are you close to the characters or objects or distant from them?
7. Are you ever made to feel disoriented in space? Is this because a character feels this way?
8. Is a particular scene brightly lighted or are there any shadows?
9. Can you see all or certain of the characters clearly?
10. Are shadows used to keep you from seeing someone or something clearly?
11. Do the characters always say what they mean? When do they say less than they are thinking or feeling? How can you tell?
12. What does the music make you feel? Where do you notice it?
13. Does the volume or quality of the characters' voices or of other sounds always correspond to your sense of the distances or space of the scene? If it doesn't, what is distorted?
14. What does the body language or movement of characters on the screen tell you about what they are thinking or feeling in a particular scene?
15. Does the film as a whole use movement of characters and objects to set a particular pace? Is it slow or fast? Do different parts of the film have different paces?
16. How does the film make us feel movement if it is present?
17. Did you notice any particular colors that were emphasized by the film?
18. What do the colors or textures of the surfaces in a particular scene make you feel?
19. Is the image on the screen ever blurred or oddly distorted so that you feel you are looking through imperfect glass?

All of these questions should, of course, be followed up by "Why?" or "If so, why?" or "If not, why?" My purpose, at least in the "pre-writing" stages of the students' work, is to encourage them to identify and to describe what they have seen of the director's techniques.

Film analysis progresses from IDENTIFICATION to DESCRIPTION and finally to INTERPRETATION. In a film

course, the act of *identification* involves the naming of the technique, students using the often newly acquired film vocabulary. In a course that is using film for a shorter unit, this stage is still a necessary one, because students must locate what they are observing. Students need to answer questions like “Where does this effect occur?” and “What is happening at this point?” and “What does the screen look like?” and “How is it arranged?”

Identification shades into *description* when students elaborate on what they have seen. Seldom, for instance, can you describe a shadow without describing the light that creates that pool of darkness. Description also develops the emotions and thoughts that the physical look of the scene evokes from the viewer. It suggests what mood is inherent in the way the director arranges space. Together identification and description tend to answer “what” and “how” questions.

Finally description becomes *interpretation* when students suggest what it all adds up to and what it means. They answer “why” questions at this point, and in this third stage of the analysis, they can be encouraged to get “literary.” Does the murkiness of the lighting suggest something about the character’s psychology? Does the dark, barren landscape always seen at great distances correspond to a theme? Is the use of green and natural textures in relation to a particular character symbolic? Do we follow one character’s point of view more often than another’s? Is the vision of this world pastoral, comic, tragic, ironic, playful? Also, students need to relate the particular technique to larger concerns--the film as a whole, another scene paralleling the one being discussed, a recurrent motif.

Clearly, the separation of these thought processes is artificial, but it gives the instructor a way of explaining to students what is left out or not fully developed in a particular analysis. I have had the best luck with a series of progressive written assignments. In the first, I will ask students to write three separate paragraphs, each in response to a different question (like those above). They are not allowed to generalize but must limit themselves to a particular effect in a particular scene. In the second assignment, I may ask them to analyze one sequence or scene in the film by commenting on at least four or five techniques and relating them to each other and to the larger purposes of the whole film (to, for instance, its development of a character or theme). Finally, in a third assignment, I ask them to cope with an entire film, but only one aspect of it. They may, for instance, trace the development of one theme by evoking particular techniques and scenes to support their larger contentions. Essentially my procedure is to teach them to develop evidence in easy stages, always keeping what they see at any given moment distinctly prominent.

I don’t allow students to evaluate or review films. Fundamentally I don’t believe that they know enough (nor do most reviewers) to make judgments about a film’s quality. But the in-

structor can lobby against evaluation and can choose excellent films to discourage it.

In correcting student papers on film, I have found three common problems. The first occurs when students leap from identification to interpretation. These students might be thought of as mystics or astrologers. By not describing what they see, students create instant meaning. My favorite example of this problem involved a student who noted that the rings given to Jennie Linden (Ursula) by Alan Bates (Birkin) in *Women in Love* were green, gold, and red, and respectively (therefore) symbolized vitality, wealth, and excitement. Students experiencing this problem in their writing about film often create mini-allegories that, the instructor needs to explain, are unrooted in any descriptive evidence in the scene.

The second most common problem is students often do not identify what they are talking about. Instead they try to describe and interpret every instance of a particular phenomenon in the film. These students are generalists and sometimes plagiarists. They have not looked closely at the film and probably have not taken notes. The result is either a series of unsupported generalizations, or the students in panic may crib a review's general comments. The instructor may also hear her own generalizations being parroted back. Usually, some attention to students' inabilities to take notes, though, can fill the void. But even the honors students can get a version of this infection. Literary types are prone to skipping both identification and description as too trivial and producing character analyses or thematic opuses.

The last common problem is the absence of interpretation. These students invert the problems of the literary types who live too much in their imaginations and not enough in the film. Students who identify and describe but stop short of explaining the significance of a technique are literalists. I find myself jotting "why?" and "significance?" liberally in the margins of these papers. Usually shy students who lack confidence in their own interpretive abilities have this problem. They need to be encouraged to live dangerously--that is, to think. The freshman who largely images the process of education as a sponge-like student and a faucet-like instructor particularly needs this encouragement.

I can't recommend that instructors using films in writing courses do what my colleague at Illinois Wesleyan University did--assign a class to write on a film currently at local theaters. Students should have a chance to see a film that they are writing on at least twice. Good students often request that a film be shown three or four times. They report that they need to see it once just to follow the narrative, a second time to get a sketchy set of notes and to decide on a topic if it has not been assigned, and a third time to fill out the first set of notes more completely. At large universities, a department or division will often have a film collection to draw upon, and many

public libraries also have collections. From the latter, a film might be shown several times over a weekend. Film distributors can be cajoled over the phone to allow special arrangements for second or third showings for a slightly higher fee or an assurance of a certain number of orders.

Film can be used effectively in writing classes in part because it is an effective stimulus to the act of looking. And students who have never or rarely thought or don't know that they know anything usually need to be taught first to look at things and people. An instructor who knows a film well can use it as a framed piece of experience to be analyzed both communally and by each student in writing.

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