Writing an Effective Analytical Essay on Films

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Overview

1. Film Review vs Film Analysis

2. Review: Narrative and Dramatic Elements of a Film

3. Putting It Together

4. Common Writing Mistakes

5. Writing Style Conventions

Film Review vs Film Analysis

Similarities between Review and Analysis

- Requires knowledge of basic film elements

- Involves critical thinking and analysis beyond impressionistic observations

- Impressionistic: "Oh. The special effects were so cool!"

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What is a film review?

- An **appraisal** of the film as a whole for people who have seen the film or who are planning to see the film

- Focuses on a general audience

- Often looks at the film in its entirety or in a general sense

- It may still involve analysis and discussion but the focus of the film review is often marketability and publicity

- Is it worth watching? Is it a good or a bad movie?

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Functions of a Film Review

- To entice the general public to see the film or not see the film

- To generate discussion among people who have seen it

- To provide some guidance to award-giving bodies and any other officials in the entertainment and cultural industries

- To offer feedback to film practitioners

- To situate the more successful films in the history of film

Medium of Film Reviews

- Print and online newspapers

- Websites

- Vlogs

Film Analysis

- Often specialized and written for academic readers in an academic setting
  ➢ Can be (but not always) theoretical
  ➢ May also require additional extensive research about the context

- Follows the conventions of academic writing (formal language) and structure of an argumentative academic essay (Intro with thesis statement → Body → Conclusion)

- May focus on only one or two aspects of the film

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Medium of Film Analysis

- In-class essays and group projects

- Academic publications such as monographs, journals, and area studies readers

- Academic presentations such as conferences and seminars

Film Analysis vs Literary Analysis

Similarities between Literary Analysis and Film Analysis

- Often requires critical close reading of the textual elements

- Uses the same critical theories for analysis in some advanced analyses

- May also require research on the context

Differences between Literary Analysis and Film Analysis

- Film analysis should not just be confined to literary elements such as plot or character analysis

- Film analysis also looks at the audio-visual elements of the film (camera, lighting, etc.)

- In some cases, the analysis may also look at other external aspects such as production, circulation, and distribution

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Review: Narrative and Dramatic Elements of a Film

Three-Act Structure of a Film

1. Act One: Set-up
   a) Hook
   b) Introduction of the Principal Characters
   c) Setting
   d) Laying out of the Themes and Stakes
   e) Ends with a Call to Action

2. Act Two: The Protagonist's Journey
   a) Rising Action or a series of actions
   b) Midpoint
   c) Confrontation

3. Act Three: Climax and Resolution

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Some Common Storylines (non-exhaustive)

1. The Hero's/Heroine's Journey (Common in Fantasy stories)
    a) Quest
    b) Voyage and Return
2. Whodunnit (Mystery stories)
3. The Coming-of-Age Story
4. Rebirth (Redemption/Reformation) Forbidden Love
5. Rags to Riches

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Some Character Types (non-exhaustive)

1. The Chosen One
2. Anti-heroes
3. The Femme Fatale
4. The Mean Girl
5. The Side Kick
6. The Wise Mentor (who often dies?)
7. The Mad Scientist
8. The *Enfant Terrible*
9. The Genius
10. The Jester/Fool

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Characterization in Film

"Characterization is the sum of all observable qualities of a human being, everything knowable through scrutiny" – Robert McKee

Characterization in Film

- **Direct Characterization:**
  - ➢ Through the film's authorial voice such as a narrator
  - ➢ Observable details such as physical features and costumes

- **Indirect Characterization:**
  - ➢ Dialogue, actions, and behavior towards people and events
  - ➢ In *Jurassic Park* (1993), how is John Hammond characterized?

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Characterization in Film

- When doing a film analysis, more emphasis should be placed on the characterization, rather than acting (which is the focus of the review)

- Review: How did Margot Robbie portray Barbie very well?

- Analysis: How was Barbie as a character represented as a feminist icon?

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Review:
Selected Film Elements

Camera Shots and Angles

- Sequences → Scenes →Shots

- Shots help create the meaning and help set the tone of particular scenes

Camera Shots

1. Establishing shot
2. Master shot
3. Wide shot
4. The Full Shot
5. The Medium Shot

Establishing Shot

- Establishes the setting and locale of the scene
- Typically used at the beginning of films (especially in sci-fi or fantasy films) but can be used in many other situations such as scene changes
- *Blade Runner* (1982)

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Master Shot

- Whereas the Establishing Shot is more focused on setting up the locale, the Master Shot is focused on storytelling

- Includes the characters, props and everything else that builds on the characterization and the story

- Orson Welles, *Citizen Kane* (1941)

Wide Shot

- Positions the characters and subjects away from the camera
- Purpose is **to** show his/her relationship with the environment through scaling

Full Shot

- Head to Toe

- Show facial expressions and posture

- Present a character's physicality

Medium Shot

- Shot from the waist up to the head

- Similar to how we see or interact with people

- One of the most commonly-used shots

- Some variations

➢ Medium Full ("The Cowboy shot)

➢ Medium Close

Close-up

- Most useful and effective way to show a character's feelings or change in character's feelings

- Especially helpful in climaxes and moments of heightened emotional intensity.

Extreme Close-up and Insert Shots

- Meant to highlight a specific area of a character or subject (such as the eyes or lips)

- Insert shots: when meant to highlight a small object (such as a water drop or a letter as it is being written)

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Camera Angles

- About perspective and perception
1. Low
2. High
3. Overhead
4. Dutch Angle
5. Eye Level
6. Shoulder
7. Knee
8. Ground

Low Angle

- Shot below the subject's eye line

- Made to make the subject more powerful (especially for heroes and villains)

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High Angle

- Opposite of the Low Angle

- Paired with Low Angle to show power imbalances in the scene

Overhead

- Also known as the "Bird's eye view"

- Meant to showcase the action, highlight the mortality or humanity of subjects ("How small we human beings are")

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Dutch Angle

- Tilted camera

- To highlight confusion, disorientation, unwellness or to even highlight certain tensions

Eye Level

- Neutral and natural (from human perspective)
- Useful also for breaking the Fourth Wall (when the character speaks to the audience)

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Shoulder

- Between eye and low angle
- Used to also highlight power dynamics but on a lesser scale

Knee and Ground Level

- A variation of the low angle but the emphasis can be on tracking a character's movement by focusing on the legs

- Can be another perspective shot

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Composition

- Arrangement and interaction of elements (characters, props, environment) within the frame of a frame

- Good composition guides the viewer's focus and understanding

Composition

1. Points and Lines
2. Shapes, Texture, and Patterns
3. Space
4. Depth
5. Balance
6. Angles
7. Color and Tone

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Points and Lines

- Points and Lines refer to the ways in which the camera directs our eyes toward subjects in elements

- Points often follow the Rule of Thirds where the focus should be placed on the points of intersection

- Lines offer narrative suggestions and guidelines

➢ Vertical lines: Power

➢ Horizontal lines: Generate calmness

➢ Leading Lines: Guiding the viewer towards something (*Skyfall* (2013))

Shapes, Textures, and Patterns

- Shapes can also generate meaning such as

➢Perfect shapes: Order and discipline, security

➢Irregular: Natural, wild, spontaneous

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Depth

- Divide the shot into three parts:
  - ➢ Foreground
  - ➢ Middle Ground
  - ➢ Background

- A way for filmmakers to change focus or to create hierarchies

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Balance

Used to maintain a sense or order in the film through the Rule of Thirds (have three subjects in the frame), the use of symmetry or the golden ratio

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Color and Tone

- How color schemes (complimentary, triadic or analogous) affect the overall process of viewing

- Tone: how brightness and darkness can also influence meaning

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Music

- Music in a film is not just auditory pleasure
- In its own ways, music helps the audience interpret the scene by playing through emotions

Exercise:
Film Clip Analysis

- *Life of Pi* (2012)

- *The Truman Show* (1998)

  Look at the different camera angles and shots.

  How about the music? How do they help describe the scene?

Putting It Together

Preparing to Write the Essay: Single Film

- Keep the word count limit in mind

- Watch the film(s) several times. On the first viewing, take note of things that stand out, such as:

  ➢ A recurring theme

  ➢ A motif

  ➢ A unique kind of characterization or trope

- On the subsequent viewing, take note of how the film builds on the theme

- Remember that you cannot say EVERYTHING about the film (quality over quantity)

- Focus on one theme and develop it

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Preparing to Write the Essay : Comparative Analysis

• Once again, keep the word count in mind

• Identify around three rubrics or points for comparison for the films. The points for comparison can be:

➢ a trope or a character type

➢ a similar storyline

➢ a theme or issue

Structure of Film Analysis Essay

Follow the typical structure of an academic essay:

1. Introduction
   A. Hook (Optional)
   B. Background of the film and/or theme in focus
   C. Premise/gist/blurb of the film
   D. Thesis statement

2. Body/Discussion Proper

3. Conclusion
   A. Summary of the thesis statement
   B. Restating the major ideas
   C. Concluding Statement

Introduction: Hook

- A hook can be a creative way of starting the essay

- The hook may be:

➢ A notable scene or dialogue from the film that can foreground the main argument

➢ An intriguing moment outside of the film (such as an incident after it was released) that may be linked to the larger argument

➢ A brief mention of the concept that will be discussed.

➢ A quote (not spoken by any of the characters) that may be linked to the discussion of the film.

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Introduction: Background

- Basic information about the film(s) such as the director, notable actors, release date, awards, and if needed, critical commentary (such as "Movie X was regarded as the first noir film")

Introduction: Premise/Blurb

- Not a summary of the film(s)!

- No more than three sentences

- Important: the writing of the premise and background must prepare the reader for the thesis statement later

- When writing the premise (and even the background), choose details that can set the reader up for the thesis statement

Introduction: Thesis Statement

•The thesis statement should be the last part of the introduction. It should state:

➢the main argument or focus of the essay

➢the division of the essay

Notes on the Introduction

- The introduction should only be one to two paragraphs in length

- It must contain only the overview of the essay – no specifics just yet

- The last sentence(s) of the introduction must be the thesis statement

Body Paragraphs

- No single organizational structure as it is highly dependent on the essay, however here are some tips and guidelines:

➢ Keep the plot summaries to a minimum and focus only on the essentials

➢ Always go back to the cinematic elements

➢ Analyze, do not review (more on this later)

Body Paragraphs:
Suggested Patterns for Organization

1. Chronological (Scene by Scene)

2. Character Analysis

3. Thematic / Issue-based

Body Paragraphs: Chronological (Scene by Scene)

1. When selecting scenes, be sure to choose the ones that make a unique contribution to the thesis statement (avoid more of the same)

2. Ideally, there should be one per act

3. The discussion of the third act is often the most important because the film's resolution is where the film's main theme or focus is stated

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Body Paragraphs: Character Analysis

1. Arrangement should not be random but should have an internal logic

2. Attempt to group the characters together first either by factions in the story (Montague vs Capulet, Dumbledore's Army vs Death Eaters) or by thematic contrast (old generation of immigrants vs new immigrants)

Body Paragraphs: Thematic / Issue-based

1. Divide the body paragraphs into 2-3 sections but ensure that they are still somehow linked with each other and to the thesis statement using signposting and transition devices

2. Themes should be issues that the film actually spends time creatively meditating on and engaging and not just a one-time mention

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Conclusion

A good conclusion restates the main arguments of the essay, paraphrases the main supporting details in the body paragraphs and, if possible, makes a creative but critical close.

Common Writing Mistakes

1. Summarizing with no analysis / Excessive Summarizing

2. Impressionistic (reviewing, not analyzing)

3. Insisting on a moral lesson (Moral lesson vs theme)

4. Attempting to cover everything

5. Random shots without elaboration

6. Failing to select suitable films for comparison

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Summarizing with No Analysis / Excessive Summarizing

- A common mistake for beginners. Possible causes:
  - ➢ Essay padding (to hit the word count limit)
  - ➢ Believing that the plot speaks for itself
  - ➢ Possible lack of ability to demonstrate

Summarizing with No Analysis / Excessive Summarizing

Solutions:

- Keep plot summaries to a minimum, focusing only on key events

- When summarizing, begin with a topic sentence that guides the analysis.

- Remind students to always pair their summarizing with actual analysis

Impressionistic (reviewing, not analyzing)

- Reviewing a film, in contrast to analysis, means looking at the film from a more-personal and observational point of view

- Using adjectives like "great," "interesting" or statements like "it captivated the audience's attention" and "it was memorable"

Impressionistic (reviewing, not analyzing)

Solutions

• Most impressionistic remarks can actually be converted to meaningful analysis. Examples:

➢ The dark colors made the character more terrifying ➔ The dark hues emphasize the inherent existential tension of the character.

➢ The audience was so intrigued by the scene ➔ The consistent use of the wide tracking shot, similar to documentary style filmmaking, repeats the parodic function of the film.

Insisting On a Moral Lesson

- Most films do not necessarily "teach" a life lesson
- In fact, even the "lessons" of such films actually have certain ideological underpinnings (e.g. Disney/Pixar films emphasis on "finding yourself" → Western notion of individuality and self-actualization)

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Insisting On a Moral Lesson

Solutions:

- Remind students to state the theme and not the moral lesson. Examples:

- *The Lion King* teaches us that we always have a responsibility for others → Simba's decision to return to Pride Rock demonstrates his choice to return to his moral duty in the order of things (*The Circle of Life*) as opposed to the hedonism that comes with the abdication of duty (*Hakuna Matata*).

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Attempting to Cover Everything

- Demonstrates lack of focus

- Will appear disorganized and inchoate and in some cases, analysis will be impressionistic

Attempting to Cover Everything

Solution:

- Aim for one concept/idea + one cinematic technique → not always the case but it can teach focus and discipline

- You can move on to another one once it is discussed sufficiently and thoroughly.

Random Shots without Elaboration

- Only identify random camera shots and filmic techniques without adequate explanation of the impact and significance in the film

- Suggest that there are no arguments to make

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Failing to Select Suitable Films for Comparison

•Tips in choosing films for comparison:

➢Choose films that focus on the same issue but are different in terms of:

(a) geographical location

(b) time period

(c) genre

(d) filmmaker

➢Avoid films that are too easy and obvious

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Exercise: Can you identify two films from the Curriculum Guide that you can compare?

Some samples:

- The Trope of the Mentor and the Troubled Teen in *Finding Forrester* (van Sant) and Dead Poets' Society (Weir)

- Social Control and Artificiality in *Pleasantville* (Ross) and *The Truman Show* (Weir)

Writing Style Conventions

Writing Style Conventions

1. Tense Use
2. Descriptive Writing
3. Narrative Writing

Tense Use

- In most cases, all action and descriptions of the film should be in **present tense,** with the exception of referring to things in the film's past.

Narrative Writing

- When writing about scenes and scene transitions, narrate the scenes from A to B

- Best to avoid "and then" as the phrase becomes stale and meaningless

- Aim for more specific words such as: "Afterwards, Before, Meanwhile, Suddenly, After a few minutes, In a minute."

- In some cases, transition words may not be needed: "The sudden darkening of the clouds prompts Pi to seek shelter"

Descriptive Writing

- Descriptive is a helpful skill to develop when referring to important cinematic elements such as scenes, setting, and characterizations and linking them to analysis later.

- May not just refer to visual elements – auditory elements are also part of the description.

- Some strategies:
  - Describing this in a spatial or organized manner (e.g. from left to right or vice versa, top to bottom or vice versa, moving forward or following the camera)
  - Having a dominant impression – what does the scene look like in general? This will allow one to select only the relevant details.
  - Showing, not telling.

Descriptive Writing

- Follow the principles of showing not telling, without being too dramatic

- Examples:

1. The house the Joneses live in is quite small → An open space serves as living room, dining room, and kitchen.

2. The anger of Truman is apparent as he confronts his wife → Frustrated with his Meryl's response, Truman bangs his hands on the table and leaps from his chair.