



The Writing Center

UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO
DENVER | ANSCHUTZ MEDICAL CAMPUS

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

Unlike analysis of written texts you examine in your classes, it can be easier to get lost in a film and lose track of considering the film critically. The most common types of film writing are movie reviews, most often found in popular media and critical and theoretical essays, which are commonly found in academia. Within these three genres, films are typically analyzed through six lenses: formalism, genre, historical, national cinema, auteur and ideology.

Movie Review

One of the most popular forms of film analysis, movie reviews often appear in newspapers and are tailored for the widest possible audiences to recommend or discourage the viewing of a film. This form is uncommon in academic writing.

Critical Essay

This form presumes the reader has seen or is familiar with the film(s) being discussed. The writer provides key details and themes but does not go into lengthy summary, keeping the focus of the analysis on a sequence or scene that may have escaped viewers on the first or second viewing. This analysis can focus on one or many of the following:

1. Form

- Looks specifically at matters of structure and style
- Often combined with one or more of the other approaches
- Strict formal analysis only looks at what happens on screen, ignoring all outside factors, such as the biography of the director, the historical context, etc.
- Ask the following questions:
 - What is most interesting and significant about the formal features? How do they add to the story and themes?
 - Looking at a particular scene or sequence, how does the lighting, sound, editing or cinematography contribute to or impact the meaning of the film?

2. Genre

- Looks at the common patterns of form (lighting, editing, cinematography, mise-en-scène, etc.) and content (narrative, characterization, themes, etc.) to determine how a film conforms to or diverges from a genre category
- Keep in mind the film's historical moment because genre changes over time
- Ask the following questions:
 - What common structures, themes, and techniques are associated with a particular genre?
 - When did this genre first appear, and why?
 - Does it conform to expectations? If not, why?

3. History

- One of the most common modes
- Situates and investigates the unique historical moment of the film's contents and/or its production/release
- Ask yourself:
 - Am I concerned with how historical events are depicted in this film?
 - Does knowing the historical background help explain the narrative or technique?
 - Will my argument clarify the film's place in history?
 - Research the effects of film technology's evolution (e.g., the rise of Technicolor)
 - Compare the subject matter of certain films to their unique historical moment (e.g., film noir's dark narratives as a result of WWI and WWII anxieties)
 - Document the reception of a film by a particular audience

Theoretical Essay

This form generally requires the writer to have a good understanding of film history, film theory, or film technicalities. Typically, these essays explain some of the larger and more complex structures of the cinema and how we understand them. Analysis can focus on one or be a mix of the following:

1. National Cinema

- Looks at a film by taking into account each country's unique way of portraying the world, exploring the cultural conditions that produce these effects
- Ask yourself:
 - What exactly distinguishes these films from the American films you are used to?
 - How do meanings change when a film is viewed outside of its culture?
 - What kind of cultural research might lead you to a deeper understanding of the themes?

2. Auteur

- One of the most pervasive theoretical forms
- Looks at how directors or other dominant figures, such as producers or actors, use pervasive themes and/or styles in their body of work

- Remember: rarely does a director have total control, and the term *auteur* has changed over time. For example, the *auteur* theory of the 1960s applied to the work of Alfred Hitchcock differs drastically from the theory now applied to that of David Lynch.
- Ask yourself:
 - How do the historical conditions of the film's production encourage or discourage the unity of the auteur's work?
 - What are the most distinctive indicators of the auteur's control over the film?

3. Ideology

- Another way of saying "politics"
 - Think about the underlying message the film is conveying about society, culture, gender, etc.
 - This category can be further broken down into these schools of thought.
 - Classic Hollywood: how classical film formulas dominate and distort ways of seeing the world
 - Feminist Studies: how women have been positively or negatively represented both in front of and behind the camera
 - Race Studies: how different races have been positively or negatively represented in front of and behind the camera
 - Class Studies: how social and economic arrangements surrounding and represented in film reflect and influence the distribution of social power
 - Postcolonial Studies: from a global perspective, how the repression and subsequent reemergence of indigenous cultures is revealed through and represented in film
 - Queer Theory: how normative gender relations can be challenged or disrupted through film

These six approaches for the critical/theoretical essay rarely appear in seclusion. Often writers mix them. For example, one could consider Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958) from an *auteurist* perspective, analyzing how it does or doesn't conform with the rest of Hitchcock's filmography; then examine the film's recurring formalist elements that contribute to the psychological vertigo of the principal character; and finally hypothesize about how the historical context of the Cold War era influences the film's content.

For further information/related concepts, please see the following handouts:

- Formal Elements of Film Chart