

WRITING ASSIGNMENTS
FST 377 AMERICAN CINEMA SINCE 1961

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Over a period of about 9 weeks, students will complete the following series of assignments on one of the topics listed on the next page:

- A) Prospectus and Working Bibliography;
- B) Detailed Outline and Refined Bibliography; and
- C) Final Paper and List of Works Cited.

You may collaborate, in pairs, on these assignments. In fact I urge you to: Other people are far less likely than you are to buy the ideas you are trying to sell. If you collaborate, submit one copy of each assignment with both authors' names.

You may turn in late your "Prospectus and Working Bibliography" and your "Detailed Outline and Refined Bibliography." Any excuse for lateness will be accepted, no matter how improbable; however, late work will receive no written comments from me (there is no other penalty), and I won't accept work handed in later than one week past the due date (I'll give you some verbal comments if you bring your paper to my office hours). Your final paper may not be turned in late. Consult the syllabus for due dates.

The assigned readings in the course offer only starting points for your research. To write an original essay, you must know what has already been written about your topic. You must therefore consult scholarly books, articles, films, and other materials (such as, perhaps, movie reviews, popular articles, or film scholars on campus) outside of those assigned. But I don't want book reports: The background research you conduct is *merely* background research. Familiarize yourself with the existing scholarship on your topic and add something truthful, insightful and original to it.

Cite all of your sources. Failure to cite sources is plagiarism, the worst form of academic corruption.

Prepare your papers and bibliographies using MLA format. See the MLA Style Guide on electronic reserve. You will also find on reserve sample outlines, prospectuses, bibliographies, and research papers—exemplary work written by students in previous courses.

Type and double space everything you hand in. Staple the pages together.

SOME HORTATORY ADVICE ABOUT WRITING ABOUT MOVIES

- 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.
- 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?*
- I care about the specificity of your ideas, the precision and vividness of your analyses, the originality and ambitiousness of your project, and, in particular, the clarity and validity of your thinking and prose.
- 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 either exciting or nugget-like 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.

Paper Topics

Pick one of the following topics:

- 1) Whereas, during the studio era, sequels and series films were rare phenomena, since the 1960s most Hollywood blockbusters have spawned sequels. Examine the phenomenon of sequelization in contemporary American cinema. Read what critics and scholars say about sequels (look up reviews of individual sequels and commentaries about sequelization generally), and watch a variety of films and their sequels. Explain what unifies sequels as a genre and what distinguishes some of the best sequels. Your essay should answer the following key questions:
 - a. What are some of the narrative and stylistic attributes common to sequels?
 - b. What are some of the burdens of sequel making, and what are some of the distinctive ways in which individual filmmakers have responded to such burdens?
 - c. Why did sequels become a major strategy for risk reduction after the studio era?
- 2) Despite Hollywood admonitions against stylistic boldness and idiosyncrasy, 1970s directors (Stanley Kubrick, Martin Scorsese, Woody Allen, Robert Altman, and others) often imbued their films with striking and distinctive stylistic markings. Examine the stylistic signature of one distinctive American director of the 1970s. What stylistic traits unify your filmmaker's work? Which earlier filmmakers does your director emulate? What distinguishes your director's best work? Finally, why did Hollywood in the 1970s allow such eccentricity to flourish, whereas traditionally Hollywood had discouraged it?
- 3) Examine the ways in which American movies of the late 1960s and 1970s began to challenge classical Hollywood narrative practices. Your paper should answer the following questions:
 - a. What are some of the common ways in which unconventional movies of that period differ from more mainstream Hollywood movies? How much do they differ? What are some illustrative examples of those differences?
 - b. Why did narrative norms change in the way they did and at that particular time?To write this paper, you will need to understand the conventions of Hollywood narrative to see what makes some films unconventional. And you should examine not just films we have seen in the course (*Bonnie and Clyde*, *Faces*, *Nashville*, *Taxi Driver*) but other films of the period (*Easy Rider*, *Pink Flamingos*, *Harold and Maude*, *Annie Hall*, *Mikey & Nicky*, *A Woman Under the Influence*, *The Conversation*, *The Heartbreak Kid*, etc.) in order to understand some of the peculiar narrative trends in filmmaking at that time.
- 4) Trace the development of an American film genre into contemporary cinema. How has the genre changed over the years? How do contemporary treatments of the genre differ from studio-era instances? What industrial, technological, historical or other factors contributed to the genre's development? What are some exemplary instances of the developments of the genre: Which films instantiate the developments or represent major advances?
- 5) Pick a specific stylistic or narrative device in American cinema of the last 50 years (e.g. Steadicam practices, alternative future narratives, CGI doctoring), and trace its development. How and why did the pattern develop? Are there studio-era precedents for it? What accounts for its emergence, development, or popularization at this particular time? Did technological advances make it possible? Did changes in the film industry increase its prevalence? How has the pattern changed over time? What are some of its exemplary instances? Your paper should answer such questions, but the heart of the paper should be in the analysis of interesting instances of the narrative or stylistic device you select.
- 6) With my permission, you may write on a different topic. You must supply me with a prepared (one paragraph) paper topic in my office hours on September 29 (or by appointment by September 30)—a topic that addresses how some aspect of contemporary American cinema developed in the way it did at the time it did. I will decide whether you may write on your topic based on whether it seems relevant to the course and whether you seem prepared to write about it.

A) Prospectus and Working Bibliography

A *prospectus* is a written proposal (about 500 words) for your research project. In it, you identify:

1. a *question* pertinent to the historical poetics of contemporary American cinema;
2. *why the question is of interest and worth researching*. Don't tell readers why you want to write about the topic; we don't care about that. Tell us why we should want to *read* your paper. Why should we care about your question?
3. *your methodology*. How do you plan to go about finding answers to your question? Lay out a plan for addressing your question and identify areas of existing research that might help answer it.

A *bibliography* is a comprehensive list of articles, books, chapters of books, films, etc. pertaining to the topic you are writing about. Avoid websites that do not have a proven history of reliable scholarship; instead use Worldcat, the Randall catalogue, and Randall's electronic databases.

Checklist: identifies a question why the question is worth researching methodology
 working bibliography in MLA format Typed / double-spaced

B) Detailed Outline and Refined Bibliography

In preparation for your final paper, you will write a detailed outline that spells out the conclusions of your research up to that point and incorporates your textual evidence and the existing literature on the topic of study.

1. Your outline should be no longer than two double-spaced typed pages.
2. It must have a clear *thesis statement*, *supporting points*, and *evidence* for the points.
 - a. Your thesis statement must in fact be a thesis statement—a statement you are trying to demonstrate or prove—not just a topic.
 - b. Your supporting points should also be theses (not topics).
 - c. Your listed evidence should support your points and sub-points and include textual evidence from films and references to previous research.
3. When you turn in your outline, include with it your original prospectus and working bibliography with my comments.

For further instructions, see “Eleven Notes about Strong Theses” and the “Sample Outline” below.

Checklist: Includes thesis, supporting points, and evidence
 refined bibliography in MLA format Typed / double-spaced / stapled
 original prospectus and working bibliography with my comments attached

C) Final Paper and List of Works Cited

Your final paper presents your research findings and analysis and includes:

- 1) A clear and explicit thesis stating the paper's conclusions (the “abstract summary” of your paper) before the beginning of the paper;
- 2) a discussion of your findings, organized according to a series of points (supporting theses) with discussions of the evidence in support of the points.

Your final paper may be quite different from your outline and prospectus; you will presumably change your points after you learn more and continue to conduct research.

The length of your paper should be determined by how much you have to say and how efficient you are in saying it.

At the end of your paper, include a “List of Works Cited” in MLA format. Also attach your original outline with my comments. Final papers will not receive comments and may not be turned in late.

Checklist: Typed / double-spaced / stapled Thesis statement (“abstract summary”) at the top
 Descriptive essay title original outline attached MLA format

ELEVEN NOTES ABOUT STRONG THESES

Since the supporting points of your outline and final paper should also be theses, these notes pertain both to your main thesis and to each of your supporting points:

1. A thesis is a statement to be demonstrated or proved.
2. A thesis is not just what the paper is about (the thesis is not the “topic” of the paper); a thesis briefly and explicitly states the paper’s *conclusion*. (Bad example: “This paper concerns the influence of welfare reform initiatives on the unemployment rate.” Good example: “Welfare reform initiatives lowered unemployment rates, increasing both employment and the difficulty of obtaining jobs.”)
3. Your thesis should make complete sense to readers on its own. Readers should understand the paper’s point without reading anything but the thesis. (Bad example: “People who eat pickles are not friendly.” Good example: “People who eat pickles are not friendly because the sour taste of the pickles makes them grouchy.”) The rest of the paper will set about *convincing* readers of what you are saying, but readers should *understand* your thesis before you try to persuade them of it.
4. Every sentence in the paper should be geared toward demonstrating the justness of the thesis.
5. Your thesis should be specific and complex enough to sustain the paper. Specific and complex theses tend to be more interesting than general and simple ones, and they are more likely to require explanation and persuasive argument. A rule of thumb regarding specificity: *Make sure that what you say about a movie or movies could be said only about that movie or movies.*
6. Write about movies; don’t write about what movies are about. (Bad example: “We can see the importance of intimacy in romantic relationships by studying the depiction of romance in film noir.” Good example: “Film noir depicts romance as dangerous by surrounding sexually alluring female figures with imagery that evokes feelings of danger and mystery.”)
7. Your thesis must be demonstrable. Does your evidence support it and convince your readers of it? Your job is not merely to tell your reader what you think: Your job is to *persuade* your reader to think what you think.
8. Your thesis should not be obvious. If we know and agree with your thesis before we read your paper, what’s the point of reading, or writing, the paper?
9. Your thesis should be true. If *you* don’t believe what you’re saying, certainly your reader won’t.
10. Your thesis is the *result* of your research, not the starting-point. In its final form, your paper’s thesis is the *last* thing you come up with before you write your final draft. Hence, although the working thesis that you stipulate in your outline will result from your research up to that point, it is unlikely to be identical to the thesis you posit in your final paper: Be willing to tinker with or even radically change your thesis as you write and conduct further research.
11. Before you hand in your outline and essay, ensure that your thesis statement and that each of your supporting points is a statement to be proved or demonstrated that is clear, comprehensible, specific, complex, about the movie or movies, demonstrable, supported by details, not obvious, and true. If so, then your points are probably in excellent shape.

Sample outline

“The Genre Film as Booby Trap: Seventies Genre Bending and *The French Connection*”
by Todd Berliner

I. Thesis statement : *The French Connection* exploits viewers’ expectations of police-detective-film formulas, misleading viewers into expecting a conventional genre film. Ultimately, the film deviates from its genre in ways that unsettle viewers and catch them off guard.

II. Main supporting point 1 : Prior to its conclusion, *The French Connection* works mostly as a straightforward police-detective film.

Example: Explanation of police-detective film conventions. Detective’s typical character traits: conflict with his superior, energetic pursuit of crime, strategic disregard of the law, determination, obsessive commitment to his case, impulsive actions.

Example : Police-detective film conventions in *The Big Combo*, *Madigan*, *Dirty Harry*, *Bullitt*, *The Narrow Margin*, *The Big Heat*, *On Dangerous Ground*.

Example: Scholarship about genre (Kaminsky, Maltby, Cawelti, Neale, Schatz, Braudy.)

Example: Formulaic examples from *French Connection*, especially car-crash scene and bar scene.

III. Main supporting point 2 : While much of *The French Connection* does indeed follow police-detective convention, several incidents throughout the movie disrupt the generic simplicity of the story and of viewers’ responses to their protagonist, Detective Popeye Doyle.

Example : Doyle’s single-mindedness in car crash scene.

Example : Doyle’s insensitivity in sniper scene

Example : detective’s racism, fanaticism and other unappealing qualities.

Example : examples of movie commentators and scholars who try (and fail) to limit the movie to the dimensions of its generic mold (Shedlin, Kael, Epps).

IV. Main supporting point 3: The ending of *The French Connection* plays a subtle joke on its audience, unpredictably altering the trajectory of the film. The final scenes indicate that what spectators took to be the film’s central concern—Doyle’s battle with the drug smugglers—was spectators’ own misinterpretation of the narrative. In the end, the movie becomes *about* all the troubling elements that have disrupted the simplicity of our responses and that distinguish the movie from standard police-detective films.

Example : *French Connection*’s deviant conclusion—the final shootout scene

Example : Doyle’s indifference to killing Mulderig

Example : closing captions show that the detective failed; detective’s detractors were right.

Example : cinematography emphasizes Doyle’s fanaticism and suspiciousness as a protagonist.

V. Main supporting point 4: The film capitalizes on the fact that the stock virtues of a generic thriller detective have a darker side. In Doyle, these virtues emerge ambiguously as character flaws, the cause of his failure as a cop.

Example : His energetic pursuit of crime and disregard of the law are linked to his brutality.

Example : His determination and obsessive commitment to his case emerge as fanaticism and callous indifference to victims.

Example: His impulsive, shoot-from-the-hip temperament results in the death of a fellow officer and leads to his suspect’s escape and a string of acquittals and reduced sentences.