

Writing a Critical Analysis of a Film

An analytical film essay for a class or publication typically runs 5–15 double-spaced pages. As an analysis, it points out how various parts of the film fit together systematically. Like a screening report and a review, the analytical essay includes descriptions, but the descriptions are typically more detailed and extensive. Like the review, the analytical essay also puts forth the writer's opinion, but here the opinion doesn't usually address the ultimate worth of the film. When you analyze a film, you're defending your view of the ways parts of the movie work together.

Think about a sad song. You could *describe* the song in various ways ("It's about a woman who wants out of a dead-end relationship"), or you could *evaluate* it ("It's too sentimental"). But you can also *analyze* it, talking about how the lyrics, the melody, and the instrumentation work together to create the feeling of sadness or to make the listener understand the relationship. That's the sort of thing people who study film do when they analyze movies.

The analytical essay is also an argumentative piece. Its goal is to allow you to develop an idea you have about the film by supplying good reasons for taking that idea seriously. The sample analyses in Chapter 11 are argumentative essays. For instance, in analyzing *The Thin Blue Line*, we argue that the film tells a real-life story in a way that suggests how difficult the search for truth can be (pp. 427–430). Likewise, our discussion of *Raging Bull* tries to show that the film is critical of violence as used in mass entertainment while still displaying a fascination with its visceral appeal (pp. 440–441).

Preparing to Write

How do you come up with an argument for your essay? The preparatory work usually consists of three steps:

Step 1: Develop a Thesis That Your Essay Will Explain and Support

Start by asking yourself questions. What do you find intriguing or disturbing about the film? What makes the film noteworthy, in your opinion? Does it illustrate some aspect of filmmaking with special clarity? Does it have an unusual

effect on the viewer? Do its implicit or symptomatic meanings (pp. 63–64) seem to have particular importance?

Your answer to such questions will furnish the *thesis* of your analysis. The thesis, in any piece of writing, is the central claim your argument advances. It encapsulates your opinion, but not in the way that a film review states your evaluation of the movie. In an analytical essay, your thesis is one way to help other viewers understand the movie. In our analysis of *His Girl Friday* (pp. 397–398), our thesis is that the film uses classical narrative devices to create an impression of speed. With respect to *Chungking Express* (pp. 445–446), our thesis is that the film draws us to seek thematic links between two story lines that do not connect causally.

Typically, your thesis will be a claim about the film's functions, its effects, or its meanings (or some mixture of all three). For instance, we argue that by creating a wide variety of characters in *Do The Right Thing*, Spike Lee builds up interconnected plotlines; this allows him to explore the problems of maintaining a community (pp. 404–408). In our discussion of *North by Northwest*, we concentrate more on how the film achieves the effects of suspense and surprise (pp. 400–404). The analysis of *Meet Me in St. Louis* emphasizes how technique carries implicit and symptomatic meanings about the importance of family life in America (pp. 431–438).

Your thesis will need some support, some reasons to believe it. Ask yourself, "What would back up my thesis?" and draw up a list of points. Some of these reasons will occur to you immediately, but others will emerge only as you start to study the film more closely. And the reasons, which are conceptual points, will in turn need backup—typically, evidence and examples. You can sum up the structure of an argumentative essay in the acronym **TREE**: Thesis supported by Reasons which rest upon Evidence and Examples.

Step 2: Draw Up a Segmentation of the Entire Film

Analyzing a film is a bit like investigating a building's design. When we walk through a building, we notice various features—the shape of the doorway, the sudden appearance of an immense atrium. We may not, however, have a very strong sense of the building's overall architecture. If

we are students of architecture, though, we want to study the design of the whole building, and so we'd examine the blueprints to understand how all the individual parts fit together. Similarly, we experience a film scene by scene, but if we want to understand how the various scenes work together, it's helpful to have a sense of the film's overall shape.

Movies don't come equipped with blueprints, however, so we have to make our own. The best way to grasp the overall shape of the movie is to make a segmentation, as we suggest in earlier chapters. (See in particular pp. 72–73, 105–106, 397, 426, and 439). Breaking the film into sequences gives you a convenient overview, and your segmentation will often suggest things that will support or help you nail down your thesis. For example, in studying *The Thin Blue Line*, we made a separate list of all the flashbacks to the murder. When we saw them lined up on our page, we spotted the pattern of development in them that became part of our analysis (pp. 425–431).

Now that you have a segmentation, you can go on to see how the parts are connected. In examining a non-narrative film, you will need to be especially alert to its use of categorical, rhetorical, abstract, or associational principles. See our analysis of *Gap-Toothed Women* (pp. 354–359) for an example of how you can base an analysis on the overall shape of the film.

If the film presents a narrative, your segmentation can help you answer questions like these: How does each scene set up causes and effects? At what point do we understand the characters' goals, and how do those goals develop in the course of the action? What principles of development connect one scene to another? The pattern of the reenactments of the shooting and the various interrogations in *The Thin Blue Line* would be difficult to discern without writing them out.

Should you include your segmentation in your written analysis? Sometimes it will make your argument clearer and more convincing. We think that a broad scene breakdown helps illustrate some key points in our discussions of *His Girl Friday* (p. 396). Perhaps your argument will gain strength if you bring out a still finer-grained segmentation; we do this in considering the three subsegments of the final chase scene in *North by Northwest* (pp. 400–404).

Whether or not your segmentation finally surfaces in your written analysis, it's good to get in the habit of writing out a fairly detailed segmentation every time you examine a film. It will help you get an overall sense of the film's design. You probably noticed that nearly every one of our analyses includes, early on, a statement about the film's underlying formal organization. This provides a firm basis for more detailed analysis. Writing out a segmentation is also good practice if you want to become a filmmaker yourself: screenwriters, directors, and other creative personnel usually work from a plot outline that is, more or less, a segmentation.

Step 3: Note Outstanding Instances of Film Technique

As you watch the film, you should jot down brief, accurate descriptions of the various film techniques used. You can get ideas for analyzing stylistic patterns from Chapters 8 and 10. Once you have determined the overall organizational structure of the film, you can identify salient techniques, trace out patterns of techniques across the whole film, and propose functions for those techniques. These techniques will often support or refine your thesis.

As a start, be alert for techniques taken one by one: Is this a case of three-point lighting? Is this a continuity cut? Just as important, you should be sensitive to context: What is the function of the technique here? Again a segmentation will help you by drawing attention to patterning. Does the technique repeat or develop across the film?

At any moment in a film, so much is going on that it's easy to be overwhelmed by all the technical elements. Shot composition, performance, lighting, camera movement, color design, dialogue, music—all these things can be changing from second to second. Often, beginning film analysts are uncertain as to what techniques are most relevant to their thesis. Sometimes they try to describe every single costume or cut or pan, and they wind up drowning in data.

This is where planning your paper's thesis in advance helps you. Your thesis will make certain techniques more pertinent than others. For example, we argue that in *North by Northwest* Hitchcock creates suspense and surprise by manipulating our range of knowledge (pp. 400–404). Sometimes he lets us know more than the main character, Roger Thornhill, and this builds up suspense: Will Thornhill walk into the traps that we know are awaiting him? Other times we know only as much as Thornhill does, so that we're as surprised as he is at a new turn of events. Hitchcock devotes particular film techniques to creating these effects. Cross-cutting between lines of action gives us more knowledge than Thornhill has, while POV camera work and cutting restrict us to his understanding of certain situations.

So other techniques, such as lighting or performance style, aren't as relevant to our thesis about *North by Northwest*. (They might, however, be very relevant to some other thesis about it—say, that it treats thriller conventions somewhat comically.) By contrast, we emphasize acting technique more in our discussion of *Raging Bull*, because acting is pertinent to our discussion of the film's use of realistic conventions. Similarly, the editing in *Meet Me in St. Louis* would be interesting from the standpoint of another argument, but it is not central to the one that we are making, so it goes almost completely unmentioned.

Once you have a thesis, an awareness of the overall shape of the film, and a set of notes on the techniques relevant to your thesis, you are ready to organize your analytical essay.

Organizing and Writing

Broadly speaking, an argumentative piece has this underlying structure:

Introduction: Background information or a vivid example, leading up to:

Statement of the thesis

Body: Reasons to believe the thesis

Evidence and examples that support the thesis

Conclusion: Restatement of the thesis and discussion of its broader implications

All of our analyses in Chapter 11 adhere to this basic structure. The opening portion seeks to lead the reader into the argument to come, and the thesis is introduced at the end of this introduction. Where the introduction is brief, as in the *His Girl Friday* analysis, the thesis comes at the end of the first paragraph (p. 396). Where more background material is needed, the introduction is somewhat longer, and the thesis is stated a little later. In the *Thin Blue Line* essay, the thesis comes at the end of the third paragraph (p. 425).

You can sometimes postpone the full statement of a thesis by casting it as a tantalizing question, as we do in our analysis of *Chungking Express* (p. 417). We end the second paragraph by asking what the film accomplishes by following one brief plot with a second one containing a new set of characters. But if you pursue the question-based structure, be sure to provide at least a hint of the answer fairly soon (as we do in the brief sixth paragraph on p. 418, just over one page into the essay) to guide the rest of your argument.

As you know, the building block of any piece of writing is the paragraph. Each slot in the argumentative pattern outlined above will be filled by one or more paragraphs. The introduction is at least one paragraph, the body will be several paragraphs, and the conclusion will be one or two paragraphs.

Typically, the introductory paragraphs of a film analysis don't display much concrete evidence. Instead, this is the place to introduce the thesis you want to advance. Often this involves situating the thesis in relation to some background information. For example, the first paragraph of our analysis of *The Thin Blue Line* summarizes the crime and investigation that are the subject matter of the film. The second paragraph sketches the circumstances that shaped the making of the film, and the third paragraph states the thesis: that finding truth is difficult.

If you're adventurous, you may wish to avoid background information. You can start with one concrete piece of evidence—say, an intriguing scene or detail from the film—before you move quickly to state your thesis. Our *Meet Me in St. Louis* piece uses this sort of opening (p. 431).

Writing a film analysis poses a particular problem of organization. Should the body of the argument follow the film's progress in chronological order, so that each para-

graph deals with a scene or major part? In most cases, this can work. We try it with our *Gap-Toothed Women* discussion, which traces out the patterns of development across the film (pp. 354–359). By and large, however, you strengthen your argument by following a more conceptual structure of the sort indicated in our outline.

Recall that the body of your essay offers reasons to believe the thesis. You'll back those points up with evidence and examples. Consider our analysis of *Breathless* (pp. 408–413). Our thesis is that Godard's film both pays homage to film noir outlaw movies and *reworks* their conventions through a rough-edged treatment. This thesis obliges us to use a comparison-and-contrast strategy. But first we start with a paragraph of background (p. 408), sketching the relevant Hollywood outlaw movie traditions. The second paragraph shows how the basic story of *Breathless* resembles the criminal-couple-on-the-run movie. The next three paragraphs make the point that Godard's film also reworks Hollywood conventions: Michel seems to be imitating tough-guy stars, while the film's form and style seem casual, as if aiming to let the audience enjoy a new, more self-conscious version of an American crime movie.

Since the essay relies on comparison and contrast, the body of the piece explores the film's similarities to and differences from Hollywood conventions. The next 11 paragraphs seek to establish these points about the film's narrative form:

1. Michel is like a Hollywood protagonist in certain ways (p. 409).
2. The action is, however, much choppy and more digressive than in a Hollywood film. (p. 409).
3. The death of the policeman is handled more abruptly and disconcertingly than in a normal action movie (pp. 409–410).
- 4,5. By contrast, the bedroom conversation of Patricia and Michel is untypical of Hollywood genre scenes because it is very static, marking little progress toward Michel's goals (p. 410).
6. Once the plot starts moving again, it stalls again (p. 410).
- 7,8. Moving toward resolution, the plot again picks up, but the finale remains enigmatic and open-ended (p. 410).
- 9,10. Overall, Michel and Patricia are puzzling and hard to read as characters (p. 411).
11. The characterization of the couple is thus sharply different from that of the romantic couple in most outlaws-on-the-run plots (p. 411).

Each of these points constitutes a reason to accept the thesis that *Breathless* uses genre conventions but also revises them in unsettling ways.

Supporting reasons may be of many sorts. Several of our analyses distinguish between reasons based on the film's overall narrative form and reasons based on stylistic choices. The portion of the *Breathless* essay we've just reviewed offers evidence to support our claims about the film's reworking of Hollywood narrative conventions. The paragraphs that follow this material (pp. 411–413) discuss Godard's similarly self-conscious use of stylistic strategies. In analyzing *Meet Me in St. Louis*, we concentrate more on reviewing various motifs that create particular thematic effects. In either case, the argument rests on a thesis, supported by reasons, which are in turn supported by evidence and examples.

If you organize the essay conceptually rather than as a blow-by-blow résumé of the action, you may find it useful to acquaint your reader with the plot action at some point. A brief synopsis soon after the introduction may do the trick. (See our *North by Northwest* analysis, pp. 400–404, or our *Chungking Express* discussion, pp. 417–422.) Alternatively, you may wish to cover basic plot material when you discuss segmentation, characterization, causal progression, or other topics. The crucial point is that you aren't obligated to follow the film's order.

Typically, each reason for the thesis becomes the topic sentence of a paragraph, with more detailed evidence displayed in the sentences that follow. In the *Breathless* example, each main point is followed by specific examples of how plot action, dialogue, or film techniques at once refer to Hollywood tradition and loosen up the conventions. Here is where your detailed notes about salient scenes or techniques will be very useful. You can select the strongest and most vivid instances of mise-en-scene, cinematography, editing, and sound to back up the main point that each paragraph explores.

The body of the analysis can be made more persuasive by several other tactics. A paragraph that compares or contrasts this film with another might help you zero in on specific aspects that are central to your argument. You can also include an in-depth analysis of a single scene or sequence that drives your argumentative point home. We use this tactic in discussing several films' endings, chiefly because a concluding section often reveals broad principles of development. For instance, in our *North by Northwest* essay, we examine the film's final twist as typical of the way the narrative manipulates our knowledge to create surprise and suspense (p. 404).

In general, the body of the argument should progress toward stronger or subtler reasons for believing the thesis. In discussing *The Thin Blue Line*, we start by tracing how the film provides a kind of reconstructed investigation, leading to the killer (pp. 425–427). Only then do we ask: is the film more than a neutral report of the case (pp. 427–428)?

This leads us to argue that the filmmaker has subtly aligned our sympathies with Randall Adams (p. 428). Yet the film goes beyond aligning us with Adams. It also bombards us with a great deal of information, some of it fairly minute, even trivial. The purpose, we suggest, is to urge the viewer to sort out conflicting data and notice details (pp. 428–429). This is a fairly complex point that would probably not come across if introduced early on. After the analysis has worked through more clear-cut matters, it's easier to consider such nuances of interpretation.

How to end your argumentative essay? Now is the time to restate the thesis (skillfully, not repeating previous statements word for word) and to remind the reader of the reasons to entertain the thesis. The ending is also an opportunity for you to try for some eloquence, a telling quotation, a bit of historical context, or a concrete motif from the film itself—perhaps a line of dialogue or an image that encapsulates your thesis. We try this tactic in our analysis of sound in *The Prestige* (pp. 302–303). In making preparatory notes, ask yourself constantly: Is there something here that can create a vivid ending?

Just as there is no general recipe for understanding film, there is no formula for writing incisive and enlightening film analyses. But there are principles and rules of thumb that govern good writing of all sorts. Only through writing, and constant rewriting, do these principles and rules seem to come second nature. By analyzing films, we can understand the sources of our pleasure in them and share that understanding with others. If we succeed, the writing itself can give pleasure to ourselves and our readers.

SUMMARY

Key Questions for an Analytical Essay

To help you craft an effective analytical essay, ask yourself these questions:

1. Do I have a thesis? Is it stated clearly early in my essay?
2. Do I have a series of reasons supporting the thesis? Are these arranged in logical and convincing order (with the strongest or most complicated reason coming last)?
3. Are my supporting reasons backed up? Do my segmentation and stylistic analysis provide specific evidence and examples for each reason you offer?
4. Does my beginning orient my reader to the direction of my argument? Does my concluding paragraph reiterate my thesis and provide a vivid ending?