

Emotions 101
LEARNING COMMUNITY
Fall 2015

Excerpted from:

Writing about Film:

THE CHALLENGES OF WRITING ABOUT FILM

(<http://www.dartmouth.edu/~writing/materials/student/humanities/film.shtml>)

What's so hard about writing about film? After all, we all "know" movies. But it's precisely our familiarity with film that presents us with our greatest writing challenge. Film is so familiar and so prevalent in our lives that we are often lulled into passive viewing (at worst) or into simple entertainment (at best). As a result, certain aspects of a film are often "invisible."

As you analyze and write about film, remember that you aren't writing a review. Reviews are generally subjective: they explore an individual's response to a film and so do not require research, analysis, and so on. As a result, reviews are often both simplistic (thumbs up, thumbs down) and "clever" (employing the pun-driven or sensational turns of phrase of popular magazines). While reviews can be useful and even entertaining pieces of prose, they generally don't qualify as "academic writing."

We aren't saying that your individual and subjective responses to a film are useless. In fact, they can be most informative. Responses can be the first step on the way to a strong analysis. Interrogate your response. What elements of the film contribute to your response? How does the film play with the genres in order to evoke a response that is fresh and convincing?

CONSTRUCTING AN INFORMED ARGUMENT

What You Know

When you sit down to write an academic paper, you'll first want to consider what you know about your topic. Different writing assignments require different degrees of knowing. A short paper written in response to a viewing of Alfred Hitchcock's *Rear Window*, for example, may not require you to be familiar with Hitchcock's other works. It may not even require you to have mastered the terms important to film criticism - though clearly any knowledge you bring to the film might help you to make a thoughtful response to it.

However, if you are asked to write an academic paper on the film, then you will want to know more. You will want to have certain terms in hand so that you can explain what Hitchcock is doing in key moments.

When you sit down to write an academic paper on film, ask yourself these questions:

What do I know about my topic?

- Can I answer the questions who, what, when, where, why, how?
- What do I know about the context of my topic?
- What historical or cultural influences do I know about that might be important to my topic?

- Does my topic belong to any particular genre or category of topics?
- What do I know about this genre?

What seems important to me about this topic?

- If I were to summarize what I know about this topic, what points would I focus on?
- What points seem less important?
- Why do I think so?

How does this topic relate to other things that I know?

- What do I know about the topic that might help my reader to understand it in new ways?

What DON'T I know about my topic?

- What do I need to know?
- How can I find out more?

What You Think

You'll discover as you consider the questions listed above that you are moving beyond what you *know* about a topic and are beginning to consider what you *think*. **In the process of really thinking about your topic, your aim is to come up with a fresh observation.** After all, it's not enough to summarize in a paper what is already known and talked about. **You must also add something of your own to the conversation.**

Understand, however, that "adding something of your own" is not an invitation simply to bring your own personal associations, reactions, or experiences to the reading of a text. To create an informed argument, you must first recognize that your writing should be *analytical* rather than *personal*. In other words, your writing must show that your associations, reactions, and experiences of a text have been framed in a critical, rather than a personal, way.

How does one move from personal response to analytical writing?

Summarize.

First, summarize what the primary text is saying. You'll notice that you can construct several different summaries, depending on your agenda. Returning to the example of Hitchcock's film, you might make a plot summary, a summary of its themes, a summary of its editing, and so on. You can also summarize what you know about the film in context. In other words, you might write a summary of the difficulties Hitchcock experienced in the film's production, or you might write a summary of how this particular movie complements or challenges other films in the Hitchcock canon. You can also summarize what others have said about the film. Film critics have written much about Hitchcock, his films, and their genre. Try to summarize all that you know.

Evaluate.

The process of evaluation is an ongoing one. You evaluate a text the moment you encounter it, and - if you aren't lazy - you continue to evaluate and to re-evaluate as you go along. Evaluating a text is different from simply reacting to a text. When you evaluate for an academic purpose, it is important to be able to clearly articulate and to support your own personal response. What in the text is leading you to respond a certain

