



Academic Writing Guide: How to Write a Film Analysis

Getting Started

First, read your assignment instructions very carefully. What components of the film are you meant to focus on and later write about? Are you meant to write about a specific scene, theme, or genre? If you are unsure about any aspects, ask your instructor for clarification.

The first time you watch the film, try to focus on understanding it. What is the narrative? Who are the main characters and what are their relationships? What is the setting? Make sure you have a solid understanding so that you can talk about the film in detail. After watching the film, make some notes about key moments, scenes, images, and sounds that stood out to you.

Then, watch it again. You should try to watch a film **several times** before writing on it. Films are a complicated, layered form of media that can only be understood through careful and repeated viewings. Take notes during each viewing. Try to focus your notes on the topic of your assignment (i.e., a formal or stylistic element, a scene, or a certain theme or idea).

As the authors of *Film Art: An Introduction* suggest, when studying films, “[l]ook and listen carefully” and “[t]hink like a filmmaker” (Bordwell et al. 307).

Writing Your Film Analysis

A film analysis will usually follow a standard essay structure: an introduction, body paragraphs, and a conclusion. Your introduction serves to introduce the film and/or scene you are analysing as well as your argument about it. The body paragraphs will explore your analysis, using evidence from the film to support your ideas. Finally, the conclusion will wrap everything up.

Your instructor may have a specific structure they would like you to follow, so please refer to the assignment instructions and ask questions if you are unsure.

The Introduction

Background Information

Briefly introduce the film that you are analysing in your paper. When writing about films, their titles should be *italicized* and events from the film should always be referred to in present tense. The first time you mention a film, you should also mention its director and year of release. Refer to directors by their full name or their last names but not just their first names. Also, when you reference a character for the first time, name the actor who portrays them.

Example

Pride and Prejudice (dir. Joe Wright, 2005) follows the protagonist Elizabeth Bennet (Keira Knightly) who...

Note: You only refer to fictional characters by their first name if that is how they are referred to in the film. When writing about documentaries, refer to people in the film by their full name and/or last name.

You may be required to analyse a specific scene from your film. If so, briefly describe the scene after you introduce the film and include a citation. Save details and analysis for the body.

Example

In the dinner scene, Mr. Collins rambles about potatoes and his relations with Lady Catherine de Bourg while the Bennet family laugh amongst themselves and mock Mr. Collins's strange behaviour (*Pride and Prejudice* 00:26:24-00:28:37).

Thesis Statement

Without a thesis, an essay has no argument (and arguably is not even an essay)! Usually, a thesis statement answers the questions posed in the instructions. A strong thesis statement contains a **specific** and **direct argument** about a key idea and an **explanation** that can be **supported** by details from the film.

Example

The film remakes of Jane Austen's novels, *Pride and Prejudice* (2005) and *Emma* (2020), dramatize aspects such as characterization, costuming, and dialogue to appeal to modern audiences through humor.

The Body (Body Paragraphs)

Each paragraph in the body will focus on a different idea, but each idea must **support** your thesis statement. Start each paragraph with a topic sentence that explains what theme, element, etc. you will discuss and the point you are making about it.

When discussing the film, avoid overly summarizing the plot—your instructor is familiar with the film. Remember, this is an analysis—you must carefully **analyze** key features from the film.

Think about how formal and narrative features or patterns contribute to the film's main themes. Use specific details as evidence to **support** your analysis. Then, carefully **explain** your analysis. Your evidence and analysis won't speak for themselves, so you should explain how they are connected.

Example

The lighting shows the tone.

This statement is not enough. What is the lighting like in the movie? What is the tone? How does the lighting show the tone?

Example

The dark lighting of the dinner scene (*Pride and Prejudice* 00:26:24-00:28:38) reflects a tone of uncertainty, emphasizing how the Bennet family feels about their eccentric cousin Mr. Collins.

This is better because it describes the lighting and tone and demonstrates their effects.

Filmmakers make choices for a reason: to help convey their film's major ideas. **Detailing** how these choices contribute to major ideas and themes will prove your ability to think critically about cinema.

Example

Augusta Elton wears a lot of bright colours throughout *Emma*.

This is a good detail to notice. However, it's not detailed enough. The claim needs evidence and an explanation as to why the detail (bright colours) matter.

Example

In a bright orange gown, Augusta Elton stands out against the pastel tones of Emma's tea party, emphasizing her outsider status and desire for attention (01:07:21-01:08:55).

Remember: Interpretations vary – a strong film analysis is not about finding the right interpretation of a film, but instead convincingly supporting your interpretation through specific evidence and analysis.

Film Studies Citations

When you discuss specific scenes or shots in a film, you need to provide an in-text citation. **MLA style** in-text citations for films use the film's title and a time stamp: (*Film Title* HH:MM:SS-HH:MM:SS).

Sometimes you will have multiple sentences with citations from the film. In MLA, you only need to include the film name for the first citation, and then only the timestamps afterwards. This is called a **consecutive citation**.

However, if you are analyzing more than one film, it is important to use the film titles to clarify which film you are discussing.

Example

Upon his first visit to the Bennet estate, Mr. Collins exclaims, “what excellent boiled potatoes” (*Pride and Prejudice* 00:26:34-00:26:36). He continues, “Many years since I’ve had such an exemplary vegetable” (00:26:38-00:26:40). His dialogue depicts him as a man who cares more about vegetables than the company of his cousins. Mr. Elton, on the other hand, shows his peculiarity at a wedding, where he speaks with a unique pronunciation: “in this time of man’s great ‘inn-oh-cence”” (*Emma* 00:07:16-00:07:20). The attendees promptly replicate his pronunciation with perplexed expressions (00:07:21-00:07:28).

You must cite all sources referenced in your paper, including all films, on a **separate** page located at the end of your paper. Make sure to use the correct style for your class and consult the WLC’s style guides for how to cite a film.

Failure to provide proper citations results in receiving a 0 and an academic alert being filed!

The Conclusion

Begin your conclusion with a restatement of your thesis in different words. Summarize the main ideas from your body paragraphs and explain why your analysis is significant to the broader subject/story. Do not introduce any new topics, analysis, or quotations. Only focus on what you have already discussed and established in your paper.

Recommended Resource

Corrigan, Timothy. *A Short Guide to Writing About Film*. Pearson, 2014.

For additional help, please make an appointment with a WLC Academic Writing Specialist at:



<https://alexander.mywconline.com/>