

# HOW TO CARRY OUT THE FIRST FILM ANALYSIS ESSAY

Use the following templates and examples to help you in creating and developing your film analysis essay. Keep these considerations in mind as you write.

## **Introduction**

The purpose of the introduction is to introduce your thesis. You need to supply the necessary sentences in order to arrive at the particular interpretive position you will occupy in your essay. You should at all times consider what your reader needs to know. You can also use your introduction to introduce the film, but this is a secondary consideration to introducing the thesis.

### **1. The Hook or Lede**

You need to open your essay with a sentence or more to attract and engage the attention of your audience. This should be subtle as opposed to blasting a bullhorn to capture the audience's attention. Here are some options to consider:

- a. Describe a pivotal shot or scene in the film that leads you toward your thesis. The ability to paint a picture with words is essential here. You can pause at a frame and describe the arrangement of the image contained therein. For example: "The coughing, hyperventilating Kane is urgently grabbed and lifted to the top of the dining room table. Blood begins slip out of the sides of his mouth...."
- b. Provide a narration and description of an anecdote related to the film. For example: "According to news accounts of the period, the child was last seen in a stroller and wearing a bonnet. The mother was distracted by the prominent images of the tabloids at the news counter. When she looked back down, the child was gone. As with this real instance of kidnapping, the film..."
- c. Use a significant and relevant quotation, but don't leave it hanging. Connect it to your discussion and be sure to introduce it as well as gloss it. For example: "Mark Twain once said, 'those of you inclined to worry have the widest selection in history.' His admonition against worrying is best exemplified in the film..."
- d. Ask a compelling and quite likely rhetorical question. For example: "What would it be like for a young adult to experience the transformation of a school chum of twenty years to suddenly turn into a mortal enemy? How would one feel about the transformation and about the person?"
- e. Provide an interesting fact or statistic related to the content of the film. For example: "Estimates range as high as 3.5 million deaths in Indochina during the twenty years of war there involving the United States and its allies. In contrast, the US suffered 58,000 casualties."
- f. Look at a related instance. I wrote an essay a few years ago on a topic related to music, but in relating that topic, I used an anecdote from my experience where I had visited the Philadelphia Museum of Art and looked at the paintings of

Francesco Clemente, specifically his miniatures that involved the concept of the “palimpsest” or the erasure or elision of a work underneath and still ever slightly visible below the new work. Even though the museum visit and the artwork were not directly related to the topic of the essay, I made a connection and built my essay from it. The lesson here is to let your imaginations roam to find connections and novel syntheses wherever possible.

## **2. Explicit Meaning of the Film**

At this point, your audience needs to know something about the film. The book, *Writing About Movies* refers to the notion of the “explicit meaning” of the film or what the movie does or is about (pp. 52-53). You could also identify the director, the main actors and the year of release if you wish. The example provided in the book is from the film *Juno* from 2007: “The film *Juno* is ‘about a rebellious but smart sixteen-year-old girl who gets pregnant and resolves to tackle the problem head-on. At first, she decides to get an abortion. But after she backs off that choice, she gets the idea to find a couple to adopt the kid after it’s born. She spends the rest of the movie dealing with the implications of that choice.’” You will need to find a way to transition from your hook into the explicit meaning. You could use a sentence transition. For example: “This problem of growing into adulthood and learning to take on responsibilities is exemplified in the film *Juno*, directed by Jason Reitman and starring Ellen Page.”

## **3. Background Information**

What else does your reader need to know before you get to your thesis? What question(s) emerge from the film that leads you to your thesis? The problem you need to resolve at this point is how to fill the gap between covering the explicit meaning of the film and the theme of the film as elucidated in your thesis. Since the thesis is supposed to answer a challenging question, identify the question you will answer and how that question emerges from the viewing of the film. For example: “Throughout the film, the inhabitants of the research station in Antarctica are one-by-one consumed, assimilated and imitated by the alien creature. After awhile, the key question becomes ‘who are one’s actual associates and who are the imitations? How does one determine the differences between them?’ Such uncertainty can only breed an extreme fear and paranoia about what is real as well as about the consequences for oneself.”

## **4. Definitions of Key Terms**

In a couple of essays I wrote, I used the concept of the “palimpsest” as a metaphor. That’s a term that required careful explanation and definition before further explanation.

## **5. The Thesis or Theme or Implicit Meaning of the Film**

After supplying the necessary background leading to your thesis as well as the question that provokes it, your task at this point is to state your thesis, which also serves as the implicit meaning of the film or the theme. The implicit meaning, according to the book,

*Writing About Movies* is “the film’s overall message or ‘point.’” You are to make an interpretive argument here, a point that someone else might dispute, so the thesis should not be obvious or uncontroversial. For example: “In *Juno*, ‘a teenager faced with a difficult decision makes a bold leap toward adulthood but, in doing so, discovers that the world of adults is no less uncertain or overwhelming than adolescence.’” You can always position your sense of the interpretive meaning of the film in relation to what others might be saying about it. For example: “While many deride the 1982 version of *The Thing* for its apparent weakness in character development, the film is actually an exploration of the experience of paranoia. It foregrounds the utter life threatening fear of alien absorption and imitation, which would in that instance render the three-dimensionality of conventional characterization completely useless. *The Thing* capitalizes on our not fully knowing individual characters in order to occupy the appearance and personalities of these characters, thereby heightening the sense of paranoia.”

## **The Body**

The categories of film analysis are plot, character, setting, irony, tone, symbolism, imagery, (to a small degree, point of view might be applicable, but classic cinema cannot be told from a first person point of view, only from the third person objective perspective). What you develop and to what degree depends very much on what kind of film you have chosen to analyze and what you determine to be the theme of the film. Certain films lend themselves to certain kinds of interpretation. Perhaps irony is a prominent element and needs to be explained in great detail, perhaps one or two paragraphs. Perhaps the setting of the film changes frequently over time and must be covered in an entire paragraph. For some films, setting is easily dealt with and dispensed in less than one sentence. For example: “The film takes place in a small New England village at the turn of the century where...” What you choose to emphasize depends on how you intend to prove your thesis. Why do you say the theme of the film is such-and-such?

You should start the body with a transition linking it to the thesis and the introduction as a whole. Instead of using the formulaic transitions that you can find via a Google search, try inventing your own. For example: “This sense of paranoia is first apparent in the structure of the narrative.” Another example: “Juno’s realization about the complexities of adulthood are first apparent in the changing locations of the story.” The repetition in the first instance is “paranoia,” which in this instance cannot be easily substituted for another term. In the second, the repetition is about Juno and her realizations about adulthood. Ideally, change the terms to synonyms if possible.

Your reader needs to know the basic storyline of the film at the start of the body. At this point, you can cover the more observational categories of interpretation: plot, character, and setting. You may decide, given the content of the film, to cover these in separate paragraphs if you have much to say about all of them. At all times when you apply this vocabulary to the film, consider what the reader needs to know. Do not discuss a character before introducing him or her. Otherwise, your essay will not be logical. Don’t

get into detail about plot before covering the location, time, season, and environment of the storyline. When covering the plot, do not summarize the plot at all. Your task is to apply the terms of plot to the film. First of all, cover the **exposition** of the storyline, the point in time and space where the story takes place. You can also identify whether the film has a **linear or non-linear** storyline. In other words, is it **chronological or a-chronological**? Then identify the **rising action**. You might also note an **inciting incident** if there is one. After the rising action, a **conflict** develops. The apex of the conflict is the **climax**. Then comes the **falling action**, and finally the **resolution**. In addition to these terms of plot, you may also note if appropriate any **flashbacks** or **foreshadowing** in the storyline. Some films do not have much of a plot line. In that instance, you can state it as such: "This film is not particularly plot-driven, so the categories of plot analysis do not apply well." With regard to character, you should identify the major characters, including the protagonist and antagonist, as well as minor characters. You should also explain which characters are developed and undeveloped, which do we know in three dimensions and which in two or one dimension?

At this point, the reader should have a reasonable grasp of the story, characters and setting. This should set the stage for the discussion that follows, which will now focus on the more interpretive categories rather than the observational ones in the first body paragraph. The rest is up to you and depends on the strategy you employ to prove your thesis. Should you cover imagery first? If so, you need to actually describe in detail frames, shots and scenes to give the reader a mental picture of what you are seeing. This requires some skill and practice. You are painting pictures with words rather than paint and pencil. Choose the visual elements to describe that highlight your overall point in your essay.

What should come next? Perhaps symbol? In this instance, you are applying the narrative meaning of symbol rather than the semiotic meaning. You identify things, people and places that have a larger significance in the overall meaning of the storyline. After that, you might consider the tone of the film. What is the attitude or manner of the story being presented? What is the narrative intent regarding the overall feeling of the film? Then, perhaps you would consider irony. At which moments in the film, does the narrative violate the viewer's expectations about what should happen? Perhaps the film does not employ irony, in which case you can omit it as a category of explanation.

James Monaco states that only a couple of instances have occurred where films were told from the first person point of view. These cases failed tremendously. Film cannot generally be told from the narrative first person point of view. They have to be told from the third person point of view, which can be objective or omniscient, depending on how much the viewer is allowed to see. General observations are objective. When the viewer is allowed to read the mind of a character or see him or her at their most private moments, then the story is told in a more omniscient or god-like manner. Otherwise, you can ignore point-of-view. You can, however, note when a voice-over takes place to suggest a particular narrative point-of-view of a character to tell the story.

Throughout the body, start your paragraphs with novel transitions like the example previously mentioned, rather than the more boring varieties you can find on the internet. Boring transitions, like boring writing in general, merit boring grades. Be sure to start all body paragraphs with strong and compelling topic sentences that specify the content to follow. Instead of writing, “the theme of the film can also be noted in its use of symbol,” remind the reader of the theme and specifically identify the symbols. Ask yourself when you write a topic sentence whether or not anyone could use the same topic sentence in any other paper. If so, then your topic sentence is not specific and unique enough. Your grade will reflect that as well.

Whatever you do, do not get hung up on the idea of finding the director’s intentions when making the film. We do not know the director’s intentions and moreover, we do not need to care about them. Intentions do not define final interpretations. Furthermore, a director may not even know his or her intentions or if they have intentions, these might not be realized as such in the final version of the film. They might not even be the director’s intentions at all. They might be those of the cinematographer, or the set designer, or the costume designer, or the screenwriter, or the producer, or even the actor. Many possibilities exist for the origin of what we see and hear in a film. In our society, we are conditioned to see every creative effort as originating by the intention of some kind of author, but we need to get out of this way of thinking in order to have an interesting interpretation. Think about it! If all we need to do is ascertain director intentions when interpreting a film, then all we need to do is interview the director and abandon the idea of writing a paper about the film! Relying on intentions also means committing the “intentional fallacy,” about which I will say more in class.

## **Conclusion**

Your target for the conclusion is at least four sentences. Six or even eight might be better though. Once again, you need a novel transition to lead into it. You can start by repeating something from the end of the previous paragraph or the main topic of that paragraph. The idea is to bring the reader back to the ultimate thematic point you are making in your essay. For example: “As can be seen in the closing moments of *The Thing* as the remaining members of the Antarctic research team, Macready and Childs, their beards and faces covered in frost, death clearly imminent as their research facility burns to the ground, the foregrounding of paranoia as a mode of survival against the ravages of an alien is ultimately futile.” My student, writing about the film *Carrie*, started with the following closing: “In a striking conveyance of horror through the high school medium...” You will note the absence of the more boring options: “in conclusion,” “to sum up,” or “in sum,” etc.

Return to your thesis and restate it differently so as not to bore your audience with exact repetition. Then show the larger implications of the discussion. What does the reader know and understand now about the film that they may not have known before? What have you shown them? Sum up your insights and then close with some final memorable remarks. This will require some creativity, both in terms of interpretation and observation

as well as in language use. My student Park Soo-jin closed her award-winning essay on *Carrie* with the following closing: “Sue’s character remains to deliver the final message: patriarchy has won; the price of mutiny is death, and the only form of consolation to expect is to live, knowing the horrific ramifications of patriarchy without the ability to speak against it.” Boom! The reader is left with a lasting impression as well as a strong feeling of futility regarding the fight against patriarchy. Another example about the cinematic adaptation of *Death of a Salesman*: “Just like the traditional tragedy, Oedipus, which cast doubt toward a God-oriented Athenian society, *Death of a Salesman* shrewdly and poignantly questions capitalist society in order to create a society where a tragedy of next Willy Loman will not have to be told.” Another boom! The close of yet another student’s essay on *Memories of Murder*: “The title *Memories of Murder* thus should be interpreted as the memories of slaughter that the dictatorial government conducted on its citizens, and that the countless citizens who died for democracy in Korea were the victims of their government’s violence.” You’ll note the novel rereading of the film as parallel to the slaughter of protesting citizens in Kwangju in 1980 during the dictatorial Chun Doo-hwan regime. Let your imaginations roll with the closing of the conclusion. Hit the audience over the head with a powerful, passionate statement or a compelling concept.

### **How Your Essay Will Be Evaluated**

Affirmative responses to the following questions will be necessary:

1. Does your essay have a compelling thesis that can be both argued for and argued against? Does it respond to a pivotal question that the film is making? (Please note that themes like “love” or “true love” are not sophisticated enough to argue for. No one would likely disagree with the notion, and the theme could be used on probably every film. It says nothing. When thinking of a thesis, please recognize that abstract concepts do not work either. The implicit meaning should be precise as well as specific enough to the film.)
2. Did you carry out a plot analysis employing all the key terms of plot, character and setting identified here?
3. Did you attempt to read symbol, irony, tone, etc. in the film to some degree? While it is not necessary and perhaps not relevant to include all of these terms, at least a couple should be applied and in a convincing way to show that you understand the terms.
4. Have you attempted to deal with imagery? Have you used strong description to give your reader a sense about what a scene or shot looks like?
5. Are you employing effective transitions at the start of every paragraph as well as throughout each paragraph to create cohesion and coherence?
6. Are your paragraphs unified under a singled topic, or do they drift in other tangents as well?
7. Do you have an effective, well-developed conclusion of around six sentences or perhaps a bit more?