

Getting students started: writing about film

Free-writing:

I like this process because it ‘frees’ the writer from any writing obstacle that might prevent the generation of ideas.

Show a short clip in class. Ask students to write for 5 minutes non-stop about the clip. The writer is not to worry about grammar, spelling, grades or editing. The point is simply to transfer all thoughts and opinions onto the page. Aim for quantity, not quality.

Looping:

An extension of the free-writing exercise, looping involves taking a sentence or phrase or idea from the student’s notes and using that as a basis for another free-write.

Choose a sentence or idea that is original, interesting or problematic.

Using that sentence, write again for another 5 minutes non-stop. Again, do not worry about spelling or grammar.

Targeted looping:

Ask students to pick a specific film technique that has been discussed in class (this could be sound, lighting, rapid-fire editing etc.) and that might be relevant to the clip.

In the next writing loop, reflect on **why** this technique is used in the clip. Why did you choose it? Why is it significant? Why does it affect the film and the viewer? Write for 5 minutes non-stop.

Final reflection:

After 15 minutes of writing, the student should have a series of notes that can be developed into an essay. Underline and circle the best ideas or comments in the notes produced: is there a thesis statement? Can a set of emerging ideas or patterns be identified that could be part of an essay or review?

Sample student writing

Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire (2005):

1. Using the rubric categories, make a list of what works and what does not work in this paragraph.
2. What suggestions would you give for revision?

Student Writer #1:

...The scene is shortened at the expense of the audience's full experience. Before the contenders enter the maze, the principal of Hogwarts, Dumbledore, has warned them to be careful as they could lose themselves along the way. The tension is built up, but the maze does a poor job in living up to the expectation of the viewer. Even for the viewer who has not read the novel, something is evidently missing from the scene. It appears that the contenders could simply become deranged because they could not find their way out, but the maze in the novel poses a much more complex and challenging task and Newell fails to bring this to the screen. The actors lacked time to deliver the powerful emotions in the maze; it might be more appropriate to allocate more time to this scene and delve into their journey of conquering the obstacles in the maze physically and mentally.

That said, it was understandable that the following scene showing the direct confrontation between Harry and Voldemort was the climax and hence deserved more screen time. It not only focuses on how Harry has to face his worst fear alone, but also the transformation of the protagonist and other students. Cedric is the first character who dies in the Harry Potter series and the tone of the series starts to become darker; this has an impact on the Hogwarts students who feel that Voldemort is truly a living threat and that the school is not as safe as it used to be and therefore the students cannot always rely on its security. Being a morally good person does not necessarily guarantee one's survival in an uncertain world. Due to the possible reasons that are mentioned above, the limited duration of a film and consequent narrative constraints, it is reasonable that the scene of the maze is shorter than that of the novel.

Never Let Me Go (2010):

1. Using the rubric categories, make a list of what works and what does not work in this paragraph.
2. What suggestions would you give for revision?

Student Writer #2:

Sound effects are actually a strength that can only occur in non-printed medium, such as a movie, while a printed medium cannot exploit this option. . The sound effects

help to create an emotional bond in the movie that helps the audience to associate with the characters' thoughts and feelings. The sound effects in the movie adaptation of *Never Let Me Go* work very well with the film. In the film adaptation, the main sound effects can be divided into diegetic sound effects and non-diegetic sound effects. Diegetic sound effects are the sound effects, also called the literal sound, which are part of the narrative sphere. (Gerald Prince 2003) In other words, diegetic sound effects are the sound that can be literally heard by the character and it works as part of the narration. Non-diegetic sound can be defined as the sound that cannot be heard by the character. They are perfectly worked on the film adaptation of *Never Let Me Go*. It is shown at the beginning of the movie adaptation and it is a totally different approach to introduce Hailsham, compared to the novel version. Both methods enrich the imagination of the audience in different ways and carries out different perspective for the story.

Apocalypse Now (1979):

1. Using the rubric categories, make a list of what works and what does not work in this paragraph.
2. What suggestions would you give for revision?

Student Writer #3:

Furthermore, Francis Ford Coppola had a humungous budget for the movie. He was able to hire A-list, if not legendary, actors to portray the famous roles of the novel. Marlon Brando played Kurtz, and Martin Sheen played Willard. Harrison Ford even made a cameo in the movie. Coppola used his Hollywood connections to craft a dark and physiological horror film by using imagery of war and practical effects such as sacrificing a real ox. If the movie had a lower budget, it would not have captured the feeling of the novel. That being said, I know the movie was plagued with mishaps and issues. Martin Sheen had a stroke on set, Marlon Brando showed up drastically overweight for shooting (which is why all of the scenes with Kurtz are in shadow), and other technical difficulties made producing the film very hard. However, the issues and confusion of the filming process were able to add to the atmosphere of the story, as making a movie is just insane as traveling to an unknown location to kill a high ranking officer. All of the events that took place during filming and in the actual movie created a free adaptation that still captured the overall feeling and setting of the novel which is very impressive.

To Kill A Mocking Bird (1962):

1. Using the rubric categories, make a list of what works and what does not work in this paragraph.
2. What suggestions would you give for revision?

Student Writer #4:

Scout's original importance continues to be overlooked in the next scene, a new plot element created by the director (37:00 – 42:29). The scene shows Atticus bringing Scout and Jem on a trip to visit Mrs. Robinson, his defendant's wife, in which Scout falls asleep before arriving. When Atticus goes into the house, the children are left in the car. Mr. Ewells suddenly appears drunkenly and stumbling along beside the car. Intimidated, Jem stares at the man until Atticus comes out from the house. The movie switches to Jem's point of view with an intensive background music, which portrays Jem's emotion more explicitly. The same shot is used again when Jem sees Mr. Ewell madly shattering glass bottles (39:36-39:42), and also later when Jem stares at the moving chair walking pass the Radley place (41:20-41:43). This scene happens out of Scout's narration, for her point of view is excluded. The narrative, then, is transitioned to Jem through the use of look-off shots. The interaction between his close-up and his look-off facial expression shows the perspective of a growing-up male. Though he is very scared, his manliness forbids him to be so. Similar to the previous mad-dog scene, the reason why Scout is cut out here might be because of her gender. Typical gender stereotype suggests when it is about danger, risk, violence and adventure, Scout, as a girl is not suitable to be in it, but rather her brother, Jem should take her place as a temporary main protagonist. In the two scenes mentioned, the movie adaptation intentionally delineates Jem as the male child who admires male dominance and overcomes his fear as a male.

Grading criteria

A range: Often an A paper has one or two "B" or even "C" moments, but they do not significantly detract from the overall force of the paper.

- **PROJECT**
 - An A paper does all the good things that B papers need to do, but an A paper is usually distinguished from B range work because the student understands his or her own project or argument from the beginning of the essay and clearly represents that understanding to the reader. It moves through its own project or argument step by step, though some of the positions of individual paragraphs may be more carefully worked out than others.
 - An A paper develops and presents its independent ideas persuasively throughout the essay.
 - Sometimes a paper achieves an A because a student develops a thoughtful and well-defined interpretive approach and an awareness of his or her own position as a writer.
 - B+ papers begin to, but may not fully, understand the actual complexity of their own argument. Possible moments of insight are not as fully developed as an A range paper.
- **WORKING WITH TEXT**
 - A papers are distinguished from B work by independent thinking that engages with the ideas in the film or reading.
 - An A paper develops its own ideas about the film or reading (ie. the ideas can't already be the ones available in the text or those of the author).
 - An A paper chooses appropriate quotations or examples, explains their significance, and works to demonstrate how these are translated to work within the paper.
 - When dealing with more than one text (like a film and a novel), A papers generally develop projects that cut across the texts in unanticipated ways.
- **ORGANIZATION**
 - The organization of the paper is logical, fluid, and clear.
- **PRESENTATION**
 - Presentation errors such as grammar, spelling and syntax must be minimal.
 - Citations are correct.

B range: B papers may include "C" moments in an otherwise well-reasoned and well-developed project.

- **PROJECT**

- B papers do everything the C essays do but offer a sustained and meaningful structure and/or an argument that is often more complex than what one finds in a C paper.
- The student advances more independent ideas. However, B papers may be distinguished by a repetition rather than a development or reconsideration of these ideas.
- B papers can represent the project of the paper in the introductory paragraph with some degree of accuracy.

- **WORKING WITH TEXT**

- The paper shows the student beginning to take interpretive risks, responding to the assignment and to the texts in thoughtful and distinctive ways.
- The paper demonstrates that the student is able to work with a variety of textual protocols. It does not rely solely on summary, reference, or paraphrase, but is able to work with quotation, examples and close-reading.
- B- papers have several moments of solid, interpretive work with the film or texts. However, the paper may not indicate how these moments contribute to the overall argument.
- B- papers more consistently attempt to engage with the more complicated ideas and examples from the texts.
- In a B- paper, the moments of working with text may remain implicit: how the writer got from point A to point B may not be explained fully or at all.

- **ORGANIZATION**

- The paper demonstrates a reasonable coherence in its overall presentation: the relationships between the paper's parts are clear and coherent.
- The presentation and development of the project is controlled and organized.
- Topic sentences and transitions between paragraphs are smoother than in a C paper.
- A B- paper may be scattered and lacks “flow” between paragraphs. There isn't a clear sense of why paragraphs are arranged in the order that they are.

- **PRESENTATION**

- Presentation errors such as grammar, spelling and syntax must be minimal.
- Citations are correct.

C range:

- **PROJECT**

- The paper has no clear or emerging project. It may work with the texts through reference, paraphrase, or quotation, but it provides no indication

of how these moments of textual work contribute to a larger point or position in the paper.

- Alternately a paper may have something it wants to say, but relies too heavily on summary and fails to engage responsibly with textual evidence.
- C+ papers have an argument, but it may not be clearly articulated. In other words, C+ papers often have position statements that do not represent the true achievement of the paper, and do not express the paper's actual project. There may be a sense that the writer has not realized that there is an argument in the paper.
- **WORKING WITH TEXT**
 - Although the paper may make reference to the issues raised by the assignment question, it does not engage effectively with texts. It privileges the student's ideas without being responsible to the texts or privileges the texts without linking them to the project.
 - Although the paper indicates that the student has watched the film (in this case) in a general sense, it demonstrates a lack of basic comprehension, or a failure to grasp the outline of the director or author's argument.
 - The paper over-generalizes about the film, or depends largely on summary of the plot or information that is not pertinent to the assignment question.
- **ORGANIZATION**
 - A C paper may have too little coherence from paragraph to paragraph, or it may lack an organizational structure. Use of paragraphs may be weak.
- **PRESENTATION**
 - The paper has significant sentence-level errors and grammar mistakes that makes it difficult to follow.
 - The paper has haphazard or inconsistent citation issues.

D - F range:

- A paper will receive a D to F grade when it fails even to approach minimum standards; fails substantially to meet the requirements of the assignment; or plagiarizes from other sources.
- The paper is over a week late and fails by technicality.