Analytical Film Reviews

Genre Guide

EWRite_

Table of Contents

1. Analytical Film Reviews

What is a review?

Reviews are a common genre – we often read reviews online and in newspapers and magazines. For example, if we want to try a new restaurant, reading a review helps us to learn more about it. Is it *thumbs up* or *thumbs down*? A review helps us decide whether to go there for a meal or to save our money and eat elsewhere.

Reviews can be for many things - restaurants, books, musical performances, TV shows, and films. These various types and formats of reviews all **describe** and **evaluate** something.

An **analytical film review** goes one step further than a usual review. It briefly **describes** the film, **evaluates** it, and also **analyzes** the film by focusing on an *interesting, significant or important area of the film*, such as its theme, to explore in depth.

Who is the audience (the reader of your review)?

The audience, or reader, of the film review is your **professor** and possibly classmates. This is an **educated** audience who has likely already seen the film and has an understanding of film theories and history. So, it is not necessary or helpful to discuss general information which is already known or to give a long summary of the film's plot.

Instead, the reader wishes to learn something new - something interesting, important or significant about an aspect of the film.

What is the purpose of an analytical film review?

An analytical film review aims to:

- Briefly describe or summarise the film
- Interpret and analyse the film
- Connect the film to theories and ideas learned in class
- Evaluate the film

1

Writing an analytical film review challenges you to demonstrate and apply your knowledge of film. This involves watching the film several times and focusing on specific aspects of the film to discuss. You will think about how the ideas and information learned in class relate to your film of choice, and may do research to see what others have written about the film. After much viewing, reading, and thinking, you will create something new and original to say about the film in your review.

Your review might focus on questions such as:

- What is the message or theme of the film?
- How do the filmmakers create that message?
- How do film elements (such as cinematography, color or sound) convey that message?
- How does the film create a strong impression on viewers?

What is film analysis?

Film analysis involves examining how a film combines its various elements (plot, characters, costume, dialogue, etc.) to create meaning. Analysis can also include connecting the film to other films of the same genre or to other films of the same director. It can include investigating the influence of history, society, or culture on the film. It can also explore how the film relates to other similar films, and/or how the film contributes to cinema or society.

Critical film analysis is a process used to develop a unique idea about a film which is backed with evidence. It involves two main steps:

The first step is **breaking the film down into parts and relationships**. These parts are called *film elements* or *cinematic techniques*. These elements are all of the important pieces that are put together to make the film, such as scene, dialogue, settings, costumes, etc.

The next step is evaluating **how these parts work together** to create the larger meaning of the film. For example, how does the editing of *Psycho* create its strong sense of horror? How does the setting of *In the Mood for Love* contribute to its nostalgic mood?

What is an Analytical Film Review?

An analytical film review briefly summarizes, and then analyzes and evaluates a chosen film. An analytical film review is typically an academic assignment, so it is important to include proper citations and references for all outside sources used.

This assignment asks you to explore the meaning and construction of the film, focusing on elements such as theme, character, setting, costume, and others. You examine the film closely and carefully to discover how and why it was put together the way it was. Then, you discuss your final views about the film and give your overall recommendation to the viewer.

This assignment asks you to think about how and why a film was constructed. Remember that <u>filmmakers make specific choices for specific reasons</u>. Directors may choose a close-up camera angle, or a long shot; these different camera angles elicit different reactions from the audience. From the setting and mise-en-scene to the color and style of costumes, each element is carefully chosen and put together to create the overall film.

Film analysis involves examining these parts and thinking about how these elements create certain effects. For example, how is the theme of the film depicted through the choice of costume, setting, cinematography, etc.? Your essay should discuss these choices, or elements, and explain their overall significance.

The analytical film review can also include discussion of the *wider context* of the film, which can be cultural, historical, etc. Theories and ideas learned in class which are relevant to the film should be applied and discussed. The review may include ideas of other reviewers and scholars, with proper citation and reference.

2. Planning an Analytical Film Review

Ten steps for planning and writing the review

1. The first time you watch the film, just enjoy it. Note your impressions and reactions; how did you feel? What did the film make you think about?

2. Watch the film critically, by being more than just a passive viewer. Rather than thinking "I'm enjoying this film", think about questions like: What is the theme or message of the film? What makes this scene so powerful? Is the film realistic, romantic or sad, and how is that effect achieved?

   If you are reviewing a famous or popular film, there is likely something noteworthy about it. Why is the film so highly regarded and enjoyed by viewers? Or conversely, what is lacking or limits the film's success?

3. Review your class notes to see which theories, ideas and information learned in lectures and tutorials relate to the film. Think about how you can discuss them in your review.

4. Do research to see what other film reviewers and experts have written about the film. Do they support or contradict with your ideas? Do they offer new insights? Think about how these views can be included in your review.

5. Chose the focus of your review, something which is important or significant about the film. – Is it an important scene, the overall theme, or the mise-en-scene?

6. Rewatch the relevant scenes to improve your notes and generate more ideas. Find or create screenshot images that will help illustrate your discussions. If you are focusing on a particular scene, you might watch it dozens of times to note the use of camera shots, editing, setting, cinematography, costume, color, etc.

7. Now, synthesize all of these ideas by putting them together. You may ask questions like: How do these parts relate to each other and work together to create the film? How do the film elements of a scene combine to impact the viewer? How do these film elements deliver a message, the theme of the film, or set a particular mood?

8. Write an outline for your review, planning your main point and the evidence and ideas you will discuss.

9. Write the first draft of the review with your main points. If possible, get feedback from a teacher, tutor or other reader, then revise and extend your draft. Edit and revise as needed.

10. Polish the formatting and proofread the language before you submit the final review.

Brainstorming and Planning Guide

As you watch the film and plan the Analytical Film Review, make notes in these areas:

FILM:	DIRECTOR:
Plot, theme, characters, dialogue, costumes, cinematography	Purpose, background, style
CONTEXT:	**OTHER SOURCES:**
Themes and theories discussed in the course, other films in the genre and by the director, society, culture	Opinions and analyses of academics and reviewers; sources for relevant theories discussed

3. Structure of an Analytical Film Review

An analytical film review typically has the following structure. Do check with your teacher to see if there are any special requirements or expectations for your assignment.

Title
Introduction
Synopsis of the film
Body paragraphs with content analysis
Conclusion
References

Other features:
Headings and subheadings
Screenshot images with captions (placed near the text which discusses them)

Key parts of the analytical film review are explained further below:

Introduction

In the Introduction you can:

- Catch the reader's attention with a "hook"*

- Give brief relevant information about the film. This may include the title, director, key actor(s), year of release, genre, etc.

- Justify the choice of film due to its significance or scope

- State the focus area of the film review

- Preview the content of the review (optional)

---

*A hook is a creative opening. Just as a fisherman uses shiny hook catches a fish, an effective hook can capture your reader's attention and provoke their interest. Here are some ideas for crafting a hook:
- An interesting fact or bit of information which relates to the film's plot, character or theme

- Dialogue from the film

- A dramatic statement about the overall impact of the film

Synopsis

In the synopsis (or summary) of the film, you can:

- Briefly summarise the main points and purpose of the film.

- Focus also on the ideas and themes you will discuss and evaluate later.

Keep this section brief, perhaps one paragraph of 100-300 words. Expect that the reader has already seen the film; a long and detailed description is unnecessary.

Body paragraphs

This is main part of your review. You should write several body paragraphs which:

- Analyse and explain your ideas regarding the focus area of the film which you chose
- Elaborate on the points of your analysis.

This structure can be used to build strong paragraphs:

Topic Sentence:	An idea about the film which supports your thesis statement; this sets the focus of the paragraph
Evidence:	Specific evidence from the film which is placed in context.
Elaboration:	Analysis and discussion of the evidence; a clear claim about the evidence
Link:	A summary of the paragraph, or a link to the next paragraph

Example body paragraph:

Aspect ratio shifting is an effective device used in the fight scenes to build up tension in the film. For example, in the dramatic cornfield fight between Tom and Francis, the aspect ratio changes from 16:9 to 21:9 as seen below in Figure 15. The faces of the two characters fill the shot and their physical and mental pain is evident. This lack of space in the frame reduces the audience's sense of security due to the imposing images. Dolan employs this technique to change the viewer's perspective in key scenes and create an unsettling and creepy mood.	*Topic sentence* *Evidence* *Elaboration* *Link back to the topic sentence*

Conclusion and recommendation

In your final paragraph, you can:

- Restate the focus of the review
- Give your overall assessment of the work, supported by reasons
- Give your overall recommendation for other viewers

4. Language for Analytical Film Reviews

Tense	Present simple tense is appropriate when discussing the film, for example: "This scene **shows** Tom's new feeling of freedom…" "An aerial shot **is used** in the opening scene…" "In this scene, Tom **is wearing** a jacket…" Also, when summarising or discussing the film plot, present tense is used: "One day, Sarah **comes to** the farm… Tom then **visits** a local bar…"
Formality	An analytical film review has a somewhat formal tone. Therefore, avoid using: - Slang - Abbreviations - Contractions - Strong emotional language - Short and disconnected sentences
Cinematic language	Become familiar with the terminology used to discuss films, such as cinematography, mise-en-scene, flashback, and others. See the list of resources on page 9 for some useful website links which include more information about cinematic language.

Language for analysis

Film analysis involves discussing the relationship of ideas and film elements. You discuss your interpretation of the film and justify the reasons for your views. These words and phrases are often used in analytical writing:

Analytical verbs:
Show: represent, portray, depict, reveal, demonstrate, convey, illustrate, give an impression **Imply**: suggest, indicate **Use**: apply, employ **Create**: construct, build **Emphasize**: highlight, stress, focus
Analytical phrases: This (x) shows that… This (x) illustrates… This (x) represents how… This (x) is important because… This (x) is significant because…

While planning your analytical film review, you have chosen important, significant or interesting aspects of the film to discuss. You may have considered different angles and points of view, and drawn implications. You should express these processes in your writing to reflect your analyses.

The adjectives *important* and *significant* can be combined with these nouns in your analytical discussions:

Adjective	Nouns commonly used with the adjective
Important	aspect, feature, element, factor, role, issue, consideration, implication, tool, technique, development, quality, stage, area, approach, decision
Significant	impact, difference, effect, change, role, development, influence, result, factor

The adjectives *meaningful, key, main*, and *relevant* could also be useful in your analysis.

Language for evaluation

This assignment involves making judgements about film elements and the overall film. These adjectives can be helpful when you give your final evaluation and recommendation regarding the film. Be sure to consult a dictionary and/or concordancer to check that you use them properly.

Excellent: amazing, breath-taking, delightful, extraordinary, remarkable, spectacular, stunning, thrilling, unforgettable

Quite good: bright, charming, enjoyable, entertaining, lively, pleasant

Neutral: adequate, average, fair, ordinary, satisfactory, typical, unexceptional

Quite bad: dull, disappointing, forgettable, lackluster, predictable, poor, slow, uninspired

Very bad: appalling, awful dreadful, terrible

5. Tips and Reminders

Don'ts	Do's
Don't just summarise the film; your professor has already seen it!	Do give a *brief* synopsis of the film without giving away any spoilers.
Don't write about too many film elements; go for *quality* rather than quantity.	Remember to focus on few important aspects of the film so you can explore them in *depth*.
Don't focus on your own feelings and impressions.	Dig deeper and explain how the *film* makes such a strong impression on viewers.
Don't discuss only plot and dialogue.	Film is a *visual* medium; incorporate analysis of other filmic elements such as camera work, editing, cinematography, color, etc.
Don't just *describe* the camera angles or editing style.	Along with explaining the use of camera and editing techniques, discuss the *implications*. Why did the director use them? What effect does the scene have on the viewer?

6. Resources

Duke University Writing Studio's "Writing about Film":
https://twp.duke.edu/sites/twp.duke.edu/files/file-attachments/film.original.pdf

Jacobs, C. J. (nd) Film Theory and Approaches to Criticism, or, What did that movie mean? *University of North Dakota*. Retrieved from: http://und.edu/faculty/christopher-jacobs/_files/docs/theory-and-analysis.pdf

U. C. Denver's "How to Write about Film":
http://www.ucdenver.edu/academics/colleges/CLAS/Centers/writing/Documents/How%20to%20write%20about%20film.pdf

Wesleyan University's "A Brief Guide to Writing Film Papers":
https://www.wesleyan.edu/writing/writingworkshop/Writing%20Workshop/film.pdf

Yale Film Studies' Film Analysis website: http://filmanalysis.yctl.org/

 *Detailed explanations of cinematic techniques and film terminology can be found at:
https://filmanalysis.coursepress.yale.edu/basic-terms/