

### USES, PURPOSES, AND PRACTICES

#### \*What role does the film text play in your course?

What place does it have in a specific writing assignment (formal or informal)? Will you be screening the entire film in class or an edited version featuring carefully selected excerpts?

When presented with a film for viewing in class, students are often conditioned to expect a break from the usual work of the class in favor of something lighter and more entertaining that takes the whole class period and requires only passive spectatorship from them. One way to break this cycle of expectation that can work against appropriate use of the film as a text for analysis in its own right is to edit it to fulfill specific objectives for a single class session. This work can include showing previously selected scenes that illustrate course concepts in narrative form. It is also helpful to model close reading of a scene or scenes for students so that they understand how to do this work on their own.

### WHAT KIND OF ACCESS WILL STUDENTS HAVE TO THE FILM IN CLASS AND OUTSIDE OF CLASS?

Try to ensure that students have opportunity for multiple viewings of the film, just as we emphasize reading textual material more than once and returning to it repeatedly in the analytical and interpretive writing process for targeted re-reading.

Some options and details:

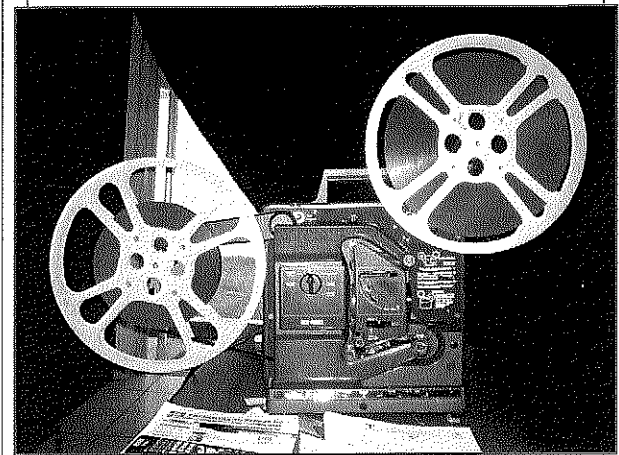
- ☞ Place the film on reserve in the library.
- ☞ Ask students to purchase a copy if featuring an entire film as a central part of a major writing assignment (prices on DVDs are now often comparable to the cost of a novel).
- ☞ Arrange for students to use school VCRs or DVD players

### FILM AS A TEXT

One of the first opportunities and challenges of incorporating a film into your course is in teaching students how to view it in an academic context. Many students' primary experience with film is as a form of entertainment or escape from critical thinking, so instructors need to create a new context and set of expectations for how students will encounter a film text in the classroom. As with any course material on your syllabus, it is helpful to ask yourself what specific function the film has in relation to the conceptual framework of your class and your other course texts..

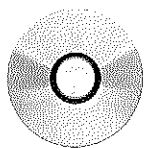
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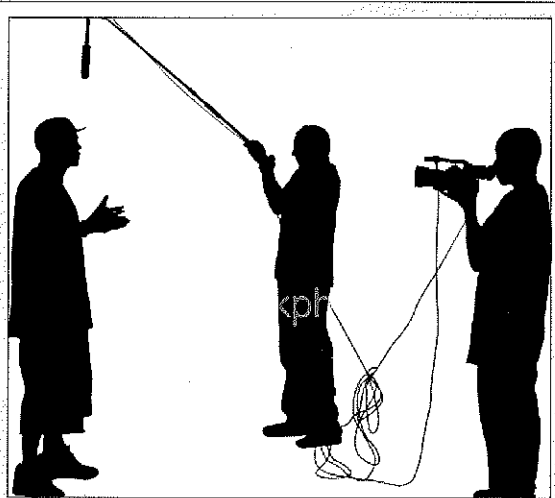
# USING FILM IN WRITING COURSES



### VISUAL LITERACY

Film is becoming more and more popular as a featured part of coursework in a wide range of academic disciplines. Students respond especially well to the power of its visual language because of their own connections to visual culture. For pedagogical purposes, their process of analyzing and interpreting film dovetails well with both their own developing visual and technological sophistication as well as providing cognitive practices that are transferable to critical thinking and writing in other university contexts.





### FILM INTO WRITING

What kind of introduction/orientation will you provide your class so that they know what to look for and pay close attention to in the film in order to derive the greatest benefit from it?

- ☞ Discuss how to **take notes** on a film
- ☞ Discuss how to **represent a film** in an academic essay
- ☞ Discuss how to **use evidence** from film in an argument (especially the importance of **quoting exact lines** and other specific language from the film)

Communicate the importance of interpreting the relationship between visual choices and film content (significance of images, colors, composition, camera movement in "takes" and "cuts"). How can students interpret the visual vocabulary of the film? To what specific ends?



# Fiction and Documentary Films

## EXAMPLES OF FILM ASSIGNMENTS

Whether using a fiction film to complement or juxtapose with a traditional literary text, or using a documentary to extend and illustrate course concepts, it is imperative to treat the film as a text in its own right. This use entails analysis of the film as a cultural artifact with its own goals, project, or agenda. A fictional film, then, is not another version of a literary text, but a separate text that can be compared fruitfully but not equated with the book text on which it is based. Common uses of film texts include the frame and case model where the film text plays either a framing/lens role or a narrative case role in a writing assignment.

**For Example:** A student might be asked to view Marc Singer's documentary film *Dark Days* about squatters in the New York City underground train system in close relation to arguments and conceptual frameworks from expository essays considered in the course. The student will be asked to respond to questions that ask him/her to apply ideas and assertions from the written texts to the concrete example of the documentary.

Another common use requires the student to feature the film as a text on its own, as in the case of a focused analysis and interpretation of Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* or David Lean's *A Passage to India*. In these examples, the student may be asked to pay close attention to a director's signature characteristics and visual vocabulary as he/she views the film, to take notes on it, and view it multiple times.

The student viewing *Vertigo*, may find it easier to produce a close reading of visual elements (and discuss how these elements contribute to meaning) than he/she has when practicing close reading with the novels in a course. The student

can often transfer these observational and interpretive skills from work with film to more traditional close reading of book texts after gaining confidence interpreting and engaging with a visual vocabulary.

The student viewing *A Passage to India* might be fascinated with the differences between how British Imperialism is portrayed and conveyed in Forster's 1920s novel as compared with Lean's 1980s film version. Students may be asked to notice how the contemporary director has transformed the original novel and the effects and significance of the changes made to it.

Films can be used in an excerpted way to facilitate discussion or featured as the central focus for major writing assignments. What matters most in their successful use is how well they are integrated into the materials, goals, and academic practices and processes of the course, and how well directed students are to the specific course function(s) of the film as well as strategies for "reading" and making analytical use of it.

