

INTRODUCTION TO FILM THEORY

A Guide to Viewing and Analyzing Films for this Class

SECTION ONE

HOW TO ANALYZE A FILM

By Understand Media

SOURCE: <https://understandmedia.com/topics/media-theory/152-how-to-analyze-a-film>

NOTE: This article has been shortened by the instructor.

When analyzing a film, it's important to understand that the film is not only a form of art, but also a product made to appeal to a certain group of people in order to make money. Most people think of movies as just art and forget the business part. To be truly media literate, we should analyze a film with both things in mind. There are various elements of a film we can analyze in order to fully understand it. Here are just a few things we can analyze.

1. Genre

The film's genre, or category, says a lot about that film, including the standard set of elements that make up that genre. Here are some questions to ask yourself about a film's genre:

- What is the genre? How do you know?
- What elements define the genre?
- What kinds of themes constantly appear in this genre?
- Who is the audience?

Think about the genre of some of your favorite movies. Why are they categorized in the genre that they are? Here are some of the most popular movie genres:

- Drama
- Comedy
- Horror
- Romance
- Action

2. Cinematography

A film's cinematography helps contribute to its style and overall effect on the audience. If the movie is darkly lit, with lots of shadows and gritty images, it feels different than if it was brightly lit with lots of bright colors. Here are some other cinematographic elements to consider:

- The camera's movement
- Framing - close ups vs long shots to convey emotion vs location/proximity
- Lighting to help convey emotion

3. Editing

A film's editing style says a lot about how we feel about the action happening on screen. A film with an edit every 10 seconds will appear to move more slowly than films with an edit every 2 seconds. Most films will mix this up, using long uninterrupted shots to instill calmness or focus in the audience, and shorter shots to make the audience feel anxious or otherwise uneasy.

4. Music

A film's music score is there to convey a message, just like every other element. Music can help drive or support the on-screen action to make the audience feel an emotion. Here are some emotions we might feel while watching a film, and the music we might associate with that emotion:

- Happiness - upbeat, uptempo, fast, bright, major keys
- Sadness - downbeat, slow, minor keys, slow violins
- Anxiety - uneven tempo, simple percussion

5. Controversial Elements

Most modern films involve some controversial elements in order to make it more interesting for audiences. Here are some of these controversial elements and how to think about them:

- Sex – is there too much? Is it increasing in films, does this reflect onto society?
 - Violence – is there too much? Is it increasing in films, does this reflect onto society?
 - Language – Is it more coarse? How much bad language is too much?
 - Health – characters don't eat healthy, they smoke, they drink.
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SECTION TWO

HOW TO ANALYZE A FILM

By Carol Dwankowski, Catharine Rudd, and Celia Suzanna Sandor.

SOURCE: <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/introliterature/chapter/how-to-analyze-a-film/>

NOTE: This article has been shortened by the instructor.

Characteristics

Films are similar to novels or short stories in that they tell a story. They include the same genres: romantic, historical, detective, thriller, adventure, horror, and science fiction. However, films may also include sub-groups such as: action, comedy, tragedy, westerns and war. The methods you use to analyze a film are closely related to those used to analyze literature; nevertheless, films are multimedial. They are visual media made for viewers. Films take command of more of our senses to create special atmospheres, feelings or to bring out emotions.

Along with the literary elements such as plot, setting, characterization, structure, and theme, which make up the text or screenplay, there are many different film techniques used to tell the story or narrative. Attention is paid to sound, music, lighting, camera angles, and editing. What is important is to focus on how all the elements are used together in making a good film.

Below is a list of elements and questions to help you when analyzing films.

Film Contents

Film Facts

- Title of film
- Year film was produced
- Nationality
- Names of the actors
- Name of director

Genre

- What main genre does the film fall under? – romantic, historical, detective, thriller, adventure, horror, and science fiction.
- What sub-grouping does the film fall under? – action, comedy, tragedy, war and westerns.

Setting

Setting is a description of where and when the story takes place.

- Does it take place in the present, the past, or the future?
- What aspects of setting are we made aware of? – Geography, weather conditions, physical environment, time of day.
- Where are we in the opening scene?

Plot and structure

- What are the most important sequences?
- How is the plot structured?
- Is it linear, chronological or is it presented through flashbacks??
- Are there several plots running parallel?
- How is suspense built up?
- Do any events foreshadow what is to come?

Conflict

Conflict or tension is usually the heart of the film and is related to the main characters.

- How would you describe the main conflict?
 - Is it internal where the character suffers inwardly?
 - is it external caused by the surroundings or environment the main character finds himself/herself in?

Characterization

Characterization deals with how the characters are described.

- through dialogue?
- by the way they speak?
- physical appearance? thoughts and feelings?
- interaction – the way they act towards other characters?
- Are they static characters who do not change?
- Do they develop by the end of the story?
- What type of characters are they?
- What qualities stand out?
- Are they stereotypes?
- Are the characters believable?

Narrator and point of view

The *narrator* is the person telling the story.

- Is there a narrator in the film? Who?
- Point of view means through whose eyes the story is being told.
- Through whose eyes does the story unfold?
- Is the story told in the first person "I" point of view?
- Is the story told through an off-screen narrator?

Imagery

In films imagery are the elements used to create pictures in our minds. They may include:

- Symbols – when something stands not only for itself (a literal meaning), but also stands for something else (a figurative meaning) e.g. The feather in the film *Forrest Gump* symbolizes his destiny.
- What images are used in the film? e.g. color, objects etc.

- Can you find any symbols?

Theme

- What are the universal ideas that shine through in the film (in other words, what is it about, in general)?

Cinematic Effects

Soundtrack

- includes both dialogue and music, as well as all the other sounds in a film.
- enhances the atmosphere of the film (what effect does the choice of music have? Does it suit the theme?)
- Are any particular sounds accentuated?

Use of the camera

- A camera shot is based on the camera's distance from the object.
- The four basic shots used in films are:
 - a close-up – a very close shot where the camera lens focuses on some detail or the actor's face.
 - medium shot – a shot where the camera lens picks up some background or upper half of the actor.
 - full shot – a shot where the camera lens has full view of the actor.
 - long shot – shot taken at a distance from an object.
- What camera shots can you identify in the film? How are they used?
- A camera angle is how the camera is tilted while filming.
 - straight-on angle – The camera is at the same height as the object.
 - high angle – The camera is filming from above the object.
 - low angle – The camera is looking up at the object.
 - oblique angle – The camera is tilted sideways.
- Does the way in which the camera is held say anything about the character?

Lighting

- Lighting focuses the audience's attention on the main character or object in a film.
- It also sets the mood or atmosphere.
- While high-key lighting is bright and illuminating, low-key lighting is darker with a lot of shadows.
- What special lighting effects are used during the most important scenes?
- Filters are often used to soften and reduce harsh contrasts. They can also be used to eliminate haze, ultraviolet light or glare from water when shooting outside.
- Using color like red or orange can be used to enhance the feeling of a sunset.
- Can you find any examples where a filter has been used in the film?
- What effect did using a filter have on the scene?

- What colors are most dominant?

Editing

Editing is the way in which a film editor together with the director cuts and assembles the scenes. The way the scenes are joined together creates the rhythm of the motion picture. Scenes can be long and drawn out or short and choppy.

- Can you see a pattern to how the scenes are cut?
- How would you describe the pace/tempo of the film?

Conclusion

When analyzing films for school work or projects, you may be asked to use some or all of the characteristics above. Link those elements together that seem most logical. Try to think of the film as a whole and how the elements mentioned above work together to bring out the main message of the film.

- How to Analyze a Film. **Authored by:** Carol Dwankowski, Catharine Rudd, and Celia Suzanna Sandor. **Provided by:** NDLA. **Located at:** <http://ndla.no/en/node/10649?fag=42>. **License:** [CC BY-SA: Attribution-ShareAlike](#)

SECTION THREE

HOW TO ANALYZE A MOVIE

By [sdfilmfest](#) (Tyler Schirado)

SOURCE: <https://sdfilmfest.com/how-to-analyze-a-movie-step-by-step-guide-to-reviewing-films-from-a-screener-point-of-view/>

NOTE: This article has been shortened by the instructor.

Watching the Movie

What works for me is to watch the movie in its entirety without distractions in order to get a grasp on what the director intended. If you spend your first viewing pausing, playing back, and re-watching segments at a time, you won't get a sense for the way the film was meant to be enjoyed.

I also try not to take many notes while I watch the movie—if you're jotting down a long critique or opinion while watching the movie, you can miss brief, yet vital moments. I will however, write down a word or phrase that stands out so that I can recall scenes or story information that catch my attention and that I deem important.

After You Watch the Movie

The window of time immediately following the viewing is critical. Since I don't take a lot of notes during the movie, one of the most important aspects of writing a critique is to stay focused and write down all of the things that stood out to me about the film. And since collecting my thoughts after seeing a movie can be chaotic, I need to be sure that I jot down everything that struck my radar as soon as it's over. It's better to get it all down on paper, and then evaluate what's necessary to convey to the reader later. Being precise in your commentary and incorporating specific examples from the movie to back up your opinions is key.

This is where the checklist comes into play. When I write a review, I do my best to cover all aspects of filmmaking that went into creating the final product, including:

- **Plot:** What was the movie about? Was it believable? Interesting? Thought-provoking? How was the climax revealed? How did the setting affect the story?
- **Themes and Tone:** What was the central goal of the movie? Was it made to entertain, educate, or bring awareness to an issue? Was there any strong impression the movie made on you? Did any symbolism come into play?
- **Acting and Characters:** Did you like how the characters were portrayed? Did the acting support the characters, and help them come to life? Did the characters display complex personalities or were they stereotypes? Were there characters that embodied certain archetypes to enhance or diminish the film?
- **Direction:** Did you like how the director chose to tell the story? Was the pacing and speed of the movie too fast or too slow? Was the direction comparable to other movies this director has created? Was the storytelling complex or straightforward? Was there a certain amount of suspense or tension that worked? Did the director create a captivating conflict?
- **Score:** Did the music support the mood of the movie? Was it too distracting or too subtle? Did it add to the production and work well with the script? Were the music queues timed well for the scenes they were supporting?
- **Cinematography:** Were the shots used in a unique way to tell the story? Did the coloring and lighting affect the tone? Was the action coherently shot? How well did the camera move? Were actors or settings framed well?
- **Production Design:** Did the sets feel lived-in and believable to the story or characters? Were the costumes suitable for the characters or story? Did the created environments heighten the atmosphere on camera?

- **Special Effects:** Were the special effects believable? Did they align with the era and tone of the movie? Were the effects overboard or too subtle? Did they integrate well to the purpose of the story?
- **Editing:** Was the editing clean or choppy? Was the flow consistent? What unique effects were used? How were the transitions between scenes?
- **Pace:** Did the movie flow well? Was it too fast or too slow? Was it clearly organized? Did certain scenes drag down the movie?
- **Dialogue:** Were the conversations believable or necessary? Did the dialogue bring context to plot developments? Did the words match the tone of the movie and personality of the characters?

Let's take the special effects as an example. I want to evaluate them based on utility, use within the film, and obviously how well it looks on screen. When I saw *Mad Max: Fury Road*, I was blown away with all the practical effects and how everything served a purpose to the story. It looked like everything was well crafted and built with love to develop such a brilliantly inspired wasteland.

On the other side of the coin, the *Transformers* movies, as detailed as the robots look, most of the time while I was watching the movies, I felt like I was watching a jumbled mess of computer animated metal smashing into each other. It didn't look stimulating. You want the special effects to complement the story rather than just being used as a visual device.

After you watch the movie get your ideas down as quick as possible.

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SECTION FOUR

FILM ANALYSIS

By the Writing Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
 SOURCE: <https://writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/film-analysis/>
 NOTE: This article has been shortened by the instructor.

What is film analysis, and how does it differ from literary analysis?

Film analysis is the process in which film is analyzed in terms of semiotics, narrative structure, cultural context, and mise-en-scene, among other approaches. If these terms are new to you, don't worry—they'll be explained in the next section.

Analyzing film, like [analyzing literature \(fiction texts, etc.\)](#), is a form of rhetorical analysis—critically analyzing and evaluating discourse, including words, phrases, and images. Having a clear argument and supporting evidence is every bit as critical to film analysis as to other forms of academic writing.

Unlike literature, film incorporates audiovisual elements and therefore introduces a new dimension to analysis. Ultimately, however, analysis of film is not too different. Think of all the things that make up a scene in a film: the actors, the lighting, the angles, the colors. All of these things may be absent in literature, but they are deliberate choices on the part of the director, producer, or screenwriter—as are the words chosen by the author of a work of literature. Furthermore, literature and film incorporate similar elements. They both have plots, characters, dialogue, settings, symbolism, and, just as the elements of literature can be analyzed for their intent and effect, these elements can be analyzed the same way in film.

Different types of film analysis

Listed here are common approaches to film analysis, but this is by no means an exhaustive list, and you may have discussed other approaches in class. As with any other assignment, make sure you understand your professor's expectations. This guide is best used to understand prompts or, in the case of more open-ended assignments, consider the different ways to analyze film.

Keep in mind that any of the elements of film can be analyzed, oftentimes in tandem. A single film analysis essay may simultaneously include all of the following approaches and more. As Jacques Aumont and Michel Marie propose in *Analysis of Film*, there is no correct, universal way to write film analysis.

Semiotic analysis

Semiotic analysis is the analysis of meaning behind signs and symbols, typically involving metaphors, analogies, and symbolism.

This doesn't necessarily need to be something dramatic; think about how you extrapolate information from the smallest signs in your day to day life. For instance, what characteristics can tell you about someone's personality? Something as simple as someone's appearance can reveal information about them. Mismatched shoes and bedhead might be a sign of carelessness (or something crazy happened that morning!), while an immaculate dress shirt and tie would suggest that the person is prim and proper.

Continuing in that vein:

- What might you be able to infer about characters from small hints?
- How are these hints (signs) used to construct characters? How do they relate to the relative role of those characters, or the relationships between multiple characters?

Symbols denote concepts (liberty, peace, etc.) and feelings (hate, love, etc.) that they often have nothing to do with. They are used liberally in both literature and film, and finding them uses a similar process. Ask yourself:

- What objects or images are repeated in multiple instances?
 - In Frozen Elsa's gloves appear in multiple scenes.
- In what context do they appear?
 - Her gloves are first given to her by her father to restrain her magic. She continues to wear them throughout the coronation scene, before finally, in the Let It Go sequence, she throws them away.

Again, the method of semiotic analysis in film is similar to that of literature. Think about the deeper meaning behind objects or actions.

- What might Elsa's gloves represent?
 - Elsa's gloves represent fear of her magic and, by extension, herself. Though she attempts to contain her magic by hiding her hands within gloves and denying part of her identity, she eventually abandons the gloves in a quest for self-acceptance.

Narrative structure analysis

Narrative structure analysis is the analysis of the story elements, including plot structure, character motivations, and theme. Like the dramatic structure of literature (exposition, rising action, climax, falling action, resolution), film has what is known as the Three-Act Structure: "Act One: Setup, Act Two: Confrontation, and Act Three: Resolution."

Narrative structure analysis breaks the story of the film into these three elements and might consider questions like:

- How does the story follow or deviate from typical structures?
- What is the effect of following or deviating from this structure?
- What is the theme of the film, and how is that theme constructed?

Consider again the example of Frozen. You can use symbolism and narrative structure in conjunction by placing the symbolic objects/events in the context of the narrative structure. For instance, the first appearance of the gloves is in Act One, while their abandoning takes place in Act Two; thus, the story progresses in such a way that demonstrates Elsa's personal growth. By the time of Act Three, the Resolution, her aversion to touch (a product of fearing her own magic) is gone, reflecting a theme of self-acceptance.

Contextual analysis

Contextual analysis is analysis of the film as part of a broader context. Think about the culture, time, and place of the film's creation. What might the film say about the culture that created it? What were/are the social and political concerns of the time period? Or, like researching the author of a novel, you might consider the director, producer, and other people vital to the making of the film. What is the place of this film in the director's career? Does it align with his usual style

of directing, or does it move in a new direction? Other examples of contextual approaches might be analyzing the film in terms of a civil rights or feminist movement.

For example, *Frozen* is often linked to the LGBTQ social movement. You might agree or disagree with this interpretation, and, using evidence from the film, support your argument.

Some other questions to consider:

- How does the meaning of the film change when seen outside of its culture?
- What characteristics distinguishes the film as being of its particular culture?

Mise-en-scene analysis

Mise-en-scene analysis is analysis of the arrangement of compositional elements in film—essentially, the analysis of audiovisual elements that most distinctly separate film analysis from literary analysis. Remember that the important part of a mise-en-scene analysis is not just identifying the elements of a scene, but explaining the significance behind them.

- What effects are created in a scene, and what is their purpose?
- How does the film attempt to achieve its goal by the way it looks, and does it succeed?

Audiovisual elements that can be analyzed include (but are not limited to): props and costumes, setting, lighting, camera angles, frames, special effects, choreography, music, color values, depth, placement of characters, etc. Mise-en-scene is typically the most foreign part of writing film analysis because the other components discussed are common to literary analysis, while mise-en-scene deals with elements unique to film. Using specific film terminology bolsters credibility, but you should also consider your audience. If your essay is meant to be accessible to non-specialist readers, explain what terms mean. The Resources section of this handout has links to sites that describe mise-en-scene elements in detail.

Rewatching the film and creating screen captures (still images) of certain scenes can help with detailed analysis of colors, positioning of actors, placement of objects, etc. Listening to the soundtrack can also be helpful, especially when placed in the context of particular scenes.

Some example questions:

- How is the lighting used to construct mood? Does the mood shift at any point during the film, and how is that shift in mood created?
- What does the setting say about certain characters? How are props used to reveal aspects of their personality?
- What songs were used, and why were they chosen? Are there any messages in the lyrics that pertain to the theme?