Writing about Film Noir
Spring 2012

Instructor: Molly LeClair WRTG 3020-060
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Course Description
Writing about Film Noir is a course in critical writing designed to extend and sharpen communication skills in the context of film. The course focuses on writing analyses and arguments about film noir, a style of filmmaking whose classic period extends from the early 1940s to the late 1950s, primarily in America. We will consider film noir collaboratively and critically—its aesthetic and literary origins in German expressionism, French existentialism, and American detective and crime fiction. We will examine themes, characterizations, visual elements, and recurring icons that create the style’s distinctive identity, and chart film noir’s incursion into and influence on contemporary cinema. We will look at the way in which ethnic and gender issues are reflected in noir narratives. The course is conducted as a writing seminar that depends on your energy, participation, and commitment to your classmates.

Course Objectives
Extend rhetorical knowledge.
• Explore rhetorical perspectives and theoretical dimensions as you write about film.
• Become a more astute observer and interpreter of film through critical writing.
• Study course texts and supplementary readings to fuel ideas and guide class discussions.

Extend experience in writing processes.
• Engage in peer review of works in progress to evaluate writing from the readers’ perspective.
• Organize writing critical essays into manageable stages: researching, pre-writing, outlining, drafting, revising, editing, documenting sources, and proofreading.
• Appreciate that revision is central to writing essays of high quality.
• Advance online information literacy skills to facilitate your writing and research.
• Integrate digital technologies into your writing projects and oral presentations.

Extend mastery of writing conventions.
• Practice various approaches to analysis and argument including evaluation, interpretation, speculation about causes and effects, and refutation.
• Refine style: syntax, diction, grammar, punctuation, and mechanics.
• Review research and documentation guidelines by referring to credible websites such as Purdue University OWL.

Express comprehension of content knowledge.
• Gain experience writing for different audiences.
• Draw on film—and noir—vocabulary even as you make your work accessible to secondary audiences in other disciplines.
• Practice writing in a specific rhetorical situation remembering that all course assignments are geared to a real-world and wide-ranging audience.

Texts
• Film Noir Reader, edited by Alain Silver and James Ursini, is an anthology of seminal essays on film noir written between the mid-1950s and mid-1990s by a diverse group of film theorists.
• WordPress http://noiru.wordpress.com/ makes available your syllabus, readings from the textbook What’s Your Point? by Suzanne Hudson and Molly LeClair, essay instructions, assignments, links to noir, links to writing, and venues for class discussion and commentary.
• Your colorado.edu email will be used for class announcements and for individual correspondence.
Requirements

SEMINAR PARTICIPATION
Your participation entails thoughtful discussion of assigned readings and involvement in class activities, face-to-face or online. Plan on attending regularly and arriving on time. Refer to the text when needed during discussion. A seminar is not a test of memory; you are aiming at understanding ideas and issues. Stick to the point and make notes about ideas to which you want to come back. Discuss ideas rather than each other’s off-the-cuff opinions; a seminar should not be a bull session. Do not stay confused; ask for clarification. Take turns and talk to each other, not just to the teacher. Listen carefully. The life and integrity of the course depends finally on your questions, comments, challenges, and defenses.

ATTENDANCE
More than three absences will result in the lowering of your final grade, so use them wisely. Tardiness and early departures are disruptive; therefore, two late arrivals and/or two early departures count as one absence. I do not distinguish between excused and unexcused absences. An absence is an absence. Documented cases of extended illness or injury requiring hospitalization will be assessed on an individual basis.

PEER REVIEW
Your participation in peer review calls for timely distribution of drafts, notable revision efforts, and constructive comments on your classmates’ papers. Preparedness is the key to its success.

ASSIGNMENTS AND DEBATE
You will be responsible for completing in-class and homework exercises, discussion sheets, and short written responses that generate class discussion. The debates will focus on elements of style as well as the rhetorical soundness and strategy of your arguments.

PAPERS
In the analytical essay, you will offer a theory—an interpretation or a speculation about causes and/or effects. You will break down the subject of your analysis into its component parts, then engage in inductive reasoning to arrive at and support your theory. In the critical review, you will evaluate or critique the worth of a noir film. You will break down the criteria, assess the value of each criterion, and provide evidence to support your conclusion. In the argument essay, you will counter an opposing view with refutations and constructive arguments. You will assume a rational, educated opposing view—equal in strength to your own—then engage in deductive reasoning to develop and support your position.

Grading Standards for Participation
You will earn points toward a final grade for participation and attendance. (You can’t earn participation points if you don’t attend.) You are not required to call me or to present me with an excuse; I will assume that you have a legitimate reason for missing class. Be aware, though, that more than three absences will negatively affect your grade.

Grading Standards for Peer Review
You will earn points as an active critic in our peer reviews. You will be expected to have copies of your draft turned in on time for critiquing by your classmates, make significant improvements on your draft, and discuss and offer sound commentary on your classmates’ drafts. Personal computer problems do not excuse the failure to prepare. Computer labs are available to you on campus for working on assignments, printing drafts, and accessing the instructor for help. I will not accept a paper that has not been reviewed by peers over the course of the assignment.

Grading Standards for Assignments and Debate
You will earn points for in-class and homework assignments, discussion sheets, and short written responses. I accept late work; however, any assignment that is not completed and turned in by the due date will earn no more than half credit. The debate, a component of our argument unit, is mandatory.

Points, ranging from three to zero, are earned based on participation, comprehension, completeness of assignments, and active involvement in peer reviews. At the end of the semester, points will be averaged and a grade assigned accordingly:

A 3—2.5 points  B 2.4—2 points  C 1.9—1.5 points  D 1.4—1 points  F .9—0 points
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**Grading Standards for Papers**

You will earn a letter grade for your three critical papers. Late submissions will be accepted, but your grade will be lowered by a full grade (for example, B to C) if your essay is not submitted *at class time on the due date*, then a grade after that for each class day it is late.

- **A** Paper is exceptional in form and content: original, substantive, insightful, well organized, clear, graceful, and error-free.
- **B** Paper is clearly written, well developed, and interesting, showing above average thought and writing craft, with no major flaws.
- **C** Paper is readable and reasonably organized, supporting a focused thesis. It may have unresolved problems in presentation and distracting grammatical errors and stylistic flaws—a mixture of strengths and weaknesses—fulfilling basic requirements of the assignment.
- **D** Paper is seriously deficient in content, form, style, or mechanics. It may be disorganized, illogical, confusing, unfocused, with pervasive and distracting errors.
- **F** Paper is incoherent, inappropriate, or has not undergone peer reviews.
- **0** Paper is plagiarized.

**Calculation of Grades**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
<th>Grade</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Participation</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>A+ — 98-100</td>
<td>A — 94-97</td>
<td>A- — 90-93</td>
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<tr>
<td>Peer Review</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>B+ — 88-89</td>
<td>B — 84-87</td>
<td>B- — 80-83</td>
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<tr>
<td>Assignments/Debate</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>C+ — 78-79</td>
<td>C — 74-77</td>
<td>C- — 70-73</td>
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<tr>
<td>Analytical Essay</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>D+ — 68-69</td>
<td>D — 64-67</td>
<td>D- — 60-63</td>
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<tr>
<td>Critical Review</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>F — 0-59</td>
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<tr>
<td>Argument Essay</td>
<td>20%</td>
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**Classroom Decorum and Communication**

Aside from honoring the tardy and early departure policy, please make every effort to be kind to and respect one another. Before class, remove your headphones, turn off your cell phone, and close your laptop. While there is little doubt that laptops and phone apps are significant learning tools, they nonetheless siphon other cognitive powers, pose a distraction to both users and fellow students, and, most importantly, detract from classroom culture. For 75 minutes, tune in to the instructor and to the insights of your esteemed classmates. Visit WordPress regularly to keep up with your coursework. Consult your syllabus and calendar. Check your colorado.edu email account, and make sure I have your address if you do not use a CU account. Feel free to come by my office, or write me, to tell me about a situation that interferes with your ability to do the work for this class. If I can learn about your concern during the course, I will have a chance to remedy things for you.

**Honor Code**

Plagiarism is pilfering someone else’s words or ideas. At the very least, plagiarizing will result in an F for the assignment. For more information about plagiarism and its dire consequences, visit the CU Honor Code site at [http://www.colorado.edu/academics/honorcode/](http://www.colorado.edu/academics/honorcode/).

**Accommodations for Special Needs Students**

For information about physical, learning, and psychological needs, visit Disability Services located N200 Center for Community, or visit [http://www.colorado.edu/disabilityservices/index.html](http://www.colorado.edu/disabilityservices/index.html). If you qualify for accommodations, submit a letter to me from DS within the first three days of class so that your needs can be addressed.

**Religious Observances**

I will make every effort to deal fairly with students who, because of religious obligation, have conflicts with scheduled assignments and exams. Notify me at least two weeks in advance and I will provide an opportunity for makeup assignments. Visit [http://www.colorado.edu/policies/fac_relig.html](http://www.colorado.edu/policies/fac_relig.html) for further information.

**Discrimination and Sexual Harassment**

Any student, staff, or faculty who believes s/he has been the subject of discrimination and harassment based on race, color, national origin, sex, age, disability, religion, sexual orientation, or veteran status should contact the Office of Discrimination and Harassment. Visit [http://www.colorado.edu/odh](http://www.colorado.edu/odh) for details.
# Calendar

Jan 17
Welcome, course overview, WordPress (Noir U.) accounts, texts, syllabus, class introductions
For next class: In Noir U., read *What’s Your Point? (WYP)* “Strategies for Making Your Point.”
*“Strategies” introduces rhetorical perspectives and key principles and processes of critical writing.*

Jan 19
Discuss “Strategies”; respond to in-class exercises based on the chapter.
For next class: Read *WYP* “Approaching Your Essay” and “Writing Interpretations.”
Write a summary of “Americans Also Make Noir Films” (1946) by Jean-Pierre Chartier.
*“Approaching” covers plagiarism, note taking, paraphrasing, summarizing, and quoting.*
*“Interpretations” takes you step-by-step through writing an interpretive analysis, from generating ideas and planning, to drafting, revising, and editing.*
*The online Chartier essay is a defining piece on film noir; summarizing it is an opportunity to practice writing objectively before transitioning to analysis.*

Jan 24
Discuss “Approaches” and “Interpretations”; respond to in-class exercises based on the chapters.
**DUE: CHARTIER SUMMARY**
For next class: Read *Film Noir Reader (FNR)* Introduction 3-15 and complete Discussion 1.
Read *WYP* “Writing about Causes and Effects.”
*Discussion 1 covers noir’s formal vision and language, and critical approaches to film.*
*“Causes and Effects” takes you step-by-step through writing an analysis that speculates about causes-effects, from generating ideas and planning, to drafting, revising, and editing.*

Jan 26
Discuss Silver’s “Introduction”; discuss “Causes and Effects”; respond to in-class exercises based on the chapter. Go over analytical essay assignment, in which you will validate an original thesis—a theory you have about your subject—by developing and supporting points of proof.
**DUE: DISCUSSION 1**
For next class: Read *FNR* “Towards a Definition of Film Noir” 17-25 and complete Discussion 2. Create an annotated bibliography that explores noir themes of interest to you.
*Discussion 2 covers Borde and Chaumeton’s endeavor to define film noir.*
*The annotated bibliography serves three purposes: to discover what’s out there to analyze in the noir universe, to advance your information literacy skills, and to practice documenting sources in MLA style. Explore and have fun!*

Jan 31
Discuss Borde and Chaumeton’s “Towards a Definition of Film Noir,” annotated bibliographies, and analytical essay models. Begin *Out of the Past* (1947) d. Jacques Tourneur.
**DUE: DISCUSSION 2 AND ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY**
For next class: Complete paraphrasing/punctuating quotations exercise.
*The assignment will extend your mastery of writing conventions.*

Feb 2
Go over “Writing the Short Response” and finish *Out of the Past.*
**DUE: PARAPHRASING/PUNCTUATING QUOTATIONS**
For next class: Complete your short response.
*With questions to guide you, the short response is an opportunity to write informally about your impressions of specific film elements—acting, directing, editing, cinematography, music, sound, dialogue, costumes, special effects, style. Rather than summarizing the plot, write what you think about what you saw.*

Feb 7
Discuss *Out of the Past*, peer review guidelines.
**DUE: SHORT RESPONSE OUT OF THE PAST**
For next class: Review “Drafting Your Interpretive Essay” and “Drafting Your Cause-Effect Essay” and study guidelines for peer review.
*The upcoming practice peer review will prepare you for responding to your colleagues’ works in progress and to their responses to your work in progress.*
Feb 9  PRACTICE PEER REVIEW
For next class: Prepare for whole class peer review.
√ You will make enough copies of your introductory paragraph(s) for everyone in the class, positing your thesis and points of proof—your claim and how you plan to prove it. Even though you are submitting only an introduction for review, you should be drafting body paragraphs that develop and support your two, three, or four points.

Feb 14  *Welcome* Dave Underwood from Academic Media Services, presenting “Film Language and Storyboarding.”
**DUE: GROUP 1—INTRODUCTION ANALYTICAL ESSAY (20 COPIES)**

Feb 16  Group 1—INTRODUCTION PEER REVIEW
**DUE: GROUP 2—INTRODUCTION ANALYTICAL ESSAY (20 COPIES)**

Feb 21  Group 2—INTRODUCTION PEER REVIEW
For next class: Bring three copies of a draft with a revised introduction for small-group peer review.
√ The small group peer review will give you a sense of your essay from the reader’s point of view. As both a listener and a commentator, you will examine the thesis, points of proof, qualities of unity, adequate development, organization, and coherence.

Feb 23  SMALL GROUP PEER REVIEW
**DUE: ANALYSIS DRAFT**
For next class: Read *FNR* “Notes on Noir” 53-63 and “Some Visual Motifs” 65-76.

Feb 28  With Schrader’s “Notes” and Place’s “Visual Motifs” in mind, view *Detour* (1945) d. Edgar G. Ulmer.
For next class: Complete your short response. Bring revised drafts for peer review.

Mar 1  Discuss *Detour*. Engage in peer review with your small group.
**DUE: SHORT RESPONSE DETOUR AND REVISED ANALYSIS DRAFT**
For next class: Review “Revision and Editing Checklist”; complete analytical essay.

**DUE: 5-6-PAGE ANALYSIS**
For next class: Read *WYP* “Writing Evaluations”; read *FNR* “No Way Out” 77-93.
√ “Evaluations” takes you step-by-step through writing a critical review, from viewing the film with an eye on its elements (e.g. direction, mise-en-scène, sound, theme) to drafting, revising, and editing. In the critical review, you will make an evaluative statement about the event as a whole, which your body paragraphs will then validate.

Mar 8  Discuss “Evaluations” and Porfirio’s “No Way Out.” Finish *Night and the City*.
For next class: Read *FNR* “Expressionist Doom” 203-207; complete your short response.

Mar 13  Discuss *Night and the City* and critical review exercises.
**DUE: SHORT RESPONSE NIGHT AND THE CITY**
For next class: Read *FNR* “Film Noir, Voice Over, and the Femme Fatale” 243-259 and complete Discussion 3.
√ Discussion 3 revolves around the femme fatale and the male voice-over narrative.

Mar 15  Discuss Hollinger’s “Film Noir, Voice Over” and critical review models.
**DUE: DISCUSSION 3**
For next class: Bring three copies of a full draft.

Mar 20  SMALL GROUP PEER REVIEW
**DUE: CRITICAL REVIEW DRAFT**
For next class: Review “Revision and Editing Your Review”; complete critical review.
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Mar 22  Go over argument essay: thesis, points of proof; introduce debate topics and form teams.  
**DUE: 3-4-PAGE CRITICAL REVIEW**
For next class: Read WYP “Writing Refutations”; go over debate format, choose resolutions.  
√ “Refutations” takes you step-by-step through writing an argument essay, in which you will identify the issue in contention, state a counterthesis that opposes your original thesis, and develop points of proof—refutations and constructive arguments.  
√ The debate offers an opportunity to develop and fortify rhetorical strategies that can then be applied directly to your written argument.

Mar 26-30  **SPRING BREAK  •  HAVE FUN!**

Apr 3  Discuss logical fallacies and model arguments essays; meet with your debate team.  
For next class: Read FNR “Kill Me Again” 307-329, “Son of Noir” 331-338; complete Discussion 4.  
√ Discussion 4 covers the legacy of classic noir, known as neo-noir, among contemporary filmmakers.  
√ You will increase your awareness of logical fallacies—errors in reasoning that undermine the logic of arguments. As a result, you will eschew such errors in your own rhetorical appeals and persuasive strategies to support claims and respond to opposing arguments.

Apr 5  Discuss Erickson’s “Kill Me Again” and Silver’s “Son of Noir.”
**DUE: DISCUSSION 4**
For next class: Research your debate topic.

Apr 10  Meet with your debate team; begin neo-noir TBA.  
For next class: Research debate topic.

Apr 12  Meet with your debate team; finish neo-noir TBA.  
For next class: Prepare for your debates.

Apr 17-19  **NOIR DEBATES**  
For next class: Complete final short response as you reflect on your own argument.

Apr 24  Discuss film, progress of argument essays; go over argument rubric for peer reviews.  
**DUE: SHORT RESPONSE**  
For next class: Bring in three copies of your draft.

Apr 26  **PEER REVIEW**
**DUE: ARGUMENT DRAFT**  
For next class: Bring in three copies of a revised draft.

May 1  **PEER REVIEW**
**DUE: REVISED ARGUMENT DRAFT**

May 3  **CLASS CELEBRATION  •  CONGRATULATIONS!**
**DUE: 5-6-PAGE ARGUMENT**

*Ability is what you’re capable of doing.  
Motivation determines what you do.  
Attitude determines how well you do it.*  
Raymond Chandler  
The Big Sleep  
Farewell, My Lovely  
The Long Goodbye