Film production shares much of the vocabulary of writing: filmmakers “compose” shots, learn the “grammar” of film, transition between scenes with “film punctuation,” and use “leitmotifs” to convey “characterization.” Film audiences also use some of the language used in responding to writing, like when comparing an adapted film with its source novel, skimming through a DVD’s “chapters,” or complaining about a narrative film’s “plot.” Considering these strange overlaps between the two rather different media, we can use the concept of “reading film” to hold up a lens to our understanding of the English language, particularly what it means to write and read “texts” in the liberal arts. While our focus throughout will be on developing the fundamentals of college writing, we will take film studies as a model to compare and contrast just what it is we do when we read and write. What overlaps and what diverges between the skills useful in “reading” between the two media? How is writing like and unlike filmmaking?

Assignment #1: Diagramming Difference (3-4 pp.)
Some of your fellow Queens College students want to start a film club, but they need approval from three professors in the English Department. Since you are equally interested in film and writing, these professors have turned to you for help, asking you to prepare a short presentation explaining the similarities and differences between film and writing, so they can decide whether or not film is enough like writing to justify adding a film club to the English Department.

Your task is to prepare a written speech with an accompanying diagram that describes three ways the medium of film is and is not like the medium of writing. Your diagram might take the form of a pie chart, bar graph, Venn diagram, Carroll diagram, semiotic square, flowchart, or other graphic system of organization. Write your 3-4 page analysis as if you will read it to the professors; it should explain and discuss your diagram. In comparing and contrasting film and writing, you should consider differences in any three of the following topics that would be important to English professors: motive, analysis, evidence, keyterms, structure, or any other of Harvey’s “Elements of the Academic Essay.” Remember: you have not made up your mind and are only being asked to present a written speech on how the two media are and are not similar.

Audience: English professors wondering about the value of studying or learning about film

Pre-Draft Writing Assignments: 2-3 ¶s arguing “what makes a film a film”; 2-3 ¶s arguing “against” film or writing; 2-3 ¶s identifying Harvey’s elements in a film and in an essay

Writing Lessons: identifying difference in media, attention to audience, organizational strategies

Sources: Sergei Eisenstein, “The Cinematographic Principle and the Ideogram”
André Bazin, “Adaptation, or the Cinema as Digest”
Gordon Harvey, “Elements of the Academic Essay”
Assignment #2: Reviewing the Reviewers (4-5 pp.)
Your task for this assignment is to develop a theory of how to tell a “good” film from a “bad” one. Imagine you come from a planet where the concept of a “film review” is a new one; on your home planet films are simply taken at face value. After visiting Earth on a college scholarship, you return home to a job at your local newspaper, writing its very first film review column. But before you begin, you need to convince your editor you can do a good job.

Drawing on social science disciplines such as sociology or anthropology, write for your editor a four-page “field report,” describing to her the range of beliefs about quality cinema that you found expressed in Earth film reviews. Your field report—a concept the class will define together—should (1) identify three shared concerns that different film reviewers have, (2) describe the particular rhetorical style of one film reviewer you like, and (3) present your own theory and method of reviewing films so as to distinguish “good” and “bad” film.

Audience: A skeptical but willing newspaper professional unfamiliar with evaluating films

Pre-Draft Writing Assignments: write a 400-word review of a recent film you saw; write a review of a fairy tale from the point of view of a particular film critic; write an objective “field report” of one class session; as a class compile a list of criteria for what makes a “field report”

Writing Lessons: identify rhetorical strategies, use & summary of evidence, disciplinary writing

Sources: MRQE.com (Movie Review Query Engine database): a cross-section of reviews of the same film, and different films reviews by the same reviewer (use popular reviewers like Manohla Dargis, Roger Ebert, Anthony Lane, Andrew Sarris, A.O. Scott), Amaya-Anderson’s case studies

Assignment #3: Investigative Proposal (4 paragraphs)
You are trying to get a student grant to attend and present at this year’s Society of Cinema & Media Studies conference. The special topic for this year is “Adaptation,” which fits perfectly with your course studies so far. To win the grant, you need to submit a formal proposal with the following format: in four paragraphs, (1) present a specific theme and open-ended investigative question to pursue, (2) examine the purpose of the investigation and how it will contribute to the study of adaptation, (3) consider a method or discipline for approaching your subject, and (4) identify possible resources you will use to explore your question. Since the topic is “Adaptation,” you should have a particular film or literary text as your central example, for example Shakespeare on film (e.g. Throne of Blood, O, Forbidden Planet), filmed graphic novels (e.g. Superman, Sin City, Tank Girl), classic novels (e.g. Pride and Prejudice, Clueless, Great Expectations), or novelizations of films (e.g. Star Wars, Snakes on a Plane). Remember: you need not only to describe your proposed investigation concisely, but also to convince the Society of the importance of your topic and indicate to them how you intend to research your question.

Audience: A very busy committee of film scholars trying to decide on a grant award

Pre-Draft Writing Assignments: workshop on investigative questions; 2-3 ¶s justifying topic

Writing Lessons: investigative questions, planning appropriate interdisciplinary work, concision
Assignment #4: Annotated Bibliography (4-5 pp.)
Building on the last paragraph of your Investigative Proposal, use the library’s resources to find five secondary sources that directly relate to your investigation. Using MLA style, create a Works Cited page for these five items. These sources should be scholarly, academic ones such as journal articles, book chapters, scholarly film reviews, and filmmaker interviews. Do not use Internet search engines or popular magazines and newspapers. Instead, you will use a variety of electronic databases like JSTOR, EBSCOHost, and the CUNY+ catalog. Also, one of your five sources must be in print form, such as a book or print journal. Remember before you begin to research to take into consideration the methodology or discipline you described in your Proposal’s third paragraph, so that you can limit your search to appropriate materials.

After identifying and preparing citations for five sources, select the three strongest ones and provide one-paragraph annotations for each. These annotations, or “evaluative summaries,” should begin with a 2-3 sentence overview of the article, continue with 2-3 sentences that cite and contextualize key quotations or terms, and conclude with 2-3 sentences that discuss how this source will be useful to your project.

Audience: An English professor who is not necessarily familiar with the research you uncover

Pre-Draft Writing Assignments: practice MLA style; summarize a text in 3 sentences; identify the “most important” sentence in a scholarly article; practice LOC “subject heading” searches

Writing Lessons: secondary research, MLA style, summary, evaluating evidence and quotation

Sources: CUNY+, JSTOR, EBSCOHost, Project Muse, Rosenthal Library

Assignment #5: Final Research Paper (8-10 pp.)
After much feedback and revision, your proposal on the topic of “Adaptation” has finally been accepted by the Society. Your task now is to write a formal research paper that takes a position on a problem. In your final paper, you should make an argument that offers one answer to the investigative question you developed in your Proposal Assignment.

In writing your final paper, you should complete and submit:
- a Messy First Draft, where you make an initial, experimental exploration of your proposed idea in 12-14 informal and unfinished pages;
- an Argument Abstract, where you compose a 200-word abstract of the essay you are writing, showcasing the argumentative position you are taking on your question;
- a Formal Outline, where you examine your first draft and experiment with ways of organizing the material to create an appropriate overall structure; and
- a Second Draft, where you take a more informed, analytical, and critical approach to the topic you chose to investigate.

Your Final Paper needs to incorporate at least two of the secondary sources from your Annotated Bibliography, as well as two of the shared course readings from this semester.

A Cover Letter that explains the process students went through to create their portfolio, describing the strengths they have gained by producing the pieces of writing and the challenges they still face as writers.