TIMOTHY CORRIGAN, from A Short Guide to Writing About Film

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STYLE AND STRUCTURE IN WRITING

Perhaps the greatest temptation and the most common danger in writing about film is to approach your material as if you are simply "at the movies." Describing and analyzing what you have seen as if it is only the subject of a casual conversation or a "sneak preview" for your friend or classmate will not, finally, result in an effective and polished piece of writing. Good writing about any topic is improved by a relaxed style, but the lure of film's immediacy should not distract you from the care and preparation that a film essay requires. The following guidelines sketch many of the fundamental steps and tools underlying good writing. If they are obvious, let them act simply as reminders.

In *Day for Night* (1973), director François Truffaut comments on the inevitable gap between the grand conception of a film and the nuts-and-bolts execution of that plan. Writing about film is similar. In both, the final expression of our ideas involves adjustments and work that, as Truffaut suggests about his movie, may change and even improve that original conception. This means, above all else, that the tools for executing those ideas—in this case, the principles of effective writing—must be attended to with the same care that the writer took to conceive of those ideas. We have all seen movies that are based on a brilliant idea but fall flat because of poor technique. Writers should be wary of a similar mistake.

When a viewer watches and reflects on a movie using the various approaches and with the critical vocabulary discussed in the previous chapters, the actual writing of an essay can be considerably easier. Some of the usual anxiety about finding ideas and arguments should be relieved if one methodically follows those steps.

If you have taken good notes, you have gone a long way in the "prewriting" stage. The next most crucial element of the essay is a clearly focused topic—a *thesis*—that will allow you to get at the film or films from a workable angle. This clear focus will also allow you to do a thorough analysis in a limited number of pages and, at the same time, to expand the topic along broad enough lines to keep your reader interested. Even if your instructor presents you with a general topic, you will usually have to refocus it so that it is more specific and personal. Discussing racism in D. W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* could prove too large a topic for a ten-page paper. Conversely, an essay focused on a truly minor detail, like the furniture used for one set in that movie, could prove too trivial for a long essay unless handled with dexterity and developed through research.

The scope and focus of your essay will depend, as we have noted, on the audience you foresee for it. An informed audience will not be interested in a familiar plot or such information as "Griffith was an American filmmaker." The sooner a writer determines the audience, the sooner the parameters of the essay will start to take shape. This is a critical step in writing about film because much of what you say and see, particularly during a second screening, will be guided by those parameters.

Another central task of the first stage of writing is *outlining* your topic. Many skillful writers do not work with an outline, finding it too constricting. Others find outlining absolutely necessary, especially because of the fleeting nature of a film. Under the best circumstance, a writer sketches out an outline while organizing notes into a coherent point of view on the film. An outline can take any form, ranging from clusters of observations and thoughts to a series of main points to a formally numbered and sectioned blueprint of an argument, complete with headings and subheadings. Outlines can provide real assistance with the logic of an argument. A clearly thought out outline can be invaluable when you are viewing a movie for a second or third time. It becomes a kind of viewfinder that enables you to spot significant details missed on the first screening. Here, in one student's brief outline for a paper on Roberto Benigni's *Life Is Beautiful* (1997), the writer uses full sentences to make certain that complete ideas will define the main sections of the argument (Figure 22):

Robert Tow

Life Is Beautiful as Comedic Horror

I. What is most shocking and brilliant about Life Is Beautiful is that it uses language of comedy to depict the horror of the Holocaust.

II. Normally Holocaust films have been strenuously serious:
   a. This is a historical event that was and remains incomprehensible.
   b. Two examples: Night and Fog and Schindler's List.
III. Life Is Beautiful does not avoid showing these painful and unimaginable images of fascism and the Holocaust:
   a. The brutality of normal citizens
   b. The monstrous dehumanization of the camps
   c. Spectacles of death
IV. The temporary salvation from these images of horror becomes the language and wit of the father.
   a. Language as romance
   b. Language as comic translation
   c. The language of the son as the voice-over frame of the film
V. Conclusion: Although there never has been or ever could be anything funny about the death camps of World War II, Life Is Beautiful describes the defense of the human through the comic language of a father's love for his son.

Figure 22 Writing an essay about a film as complex as *Life Is Beautiful* (1997) will always benefit from a plan and focus that clearly outlines the logic of the essay.

When the paper is written it will probably depart from this outline and will certainly become more defined and more specific. Yet, an outline of any kind can be the foundation on which you build more complex ideas.

THE RIGHT WORDS

Concrete Language

The actual writing of the essay involves guidelines that are basic to all writing and are important to rehearse and recall frequently. Because a film critic is re-creating a film and a perspective on it through language, sensitive and accurate use of words is paramount. Concreteness is the heart of some of the best film writing, largely because the reader depends so much on the visualization of a scene or sequence. Also, the accuracy with which a writer describes what he or she sees is often the most convincing way to make a point. After seeing a striking sequence from Werner Herzog's *Fata Morgana* (1970), an inexperienced writer might be tempted to write, "There was a series of strange shots, with crazy dialogue and odd characters." An experienced writer, like the author of the following passage, revitalizes the images with a lively and concrete idiom in order to comment on them:

> The strongest sequence may be a catastrophic metaphor of hell on earth: a catatonic drummer and a tacky female pianist on a tiny stage in a brothel perform a piece they have played a thousand times without any emotion, endlessly, off-key. "In the Golden Age, man and wife live in harmony," the commentator says, as they are photographed head-on, with all the merciful cruelty of a humanist filmmaker who must show everything. At the end of the piece, they remain immobile. There is no applause. (Vogel 76)

Denotation and Connotation

Denotations and connotations are other rhetorical tools that can be used effectively or ineffectively by a writer. A *denotation* is the dictionary meaning of a word; thus, *film* and *movie* have the same denotation. If you mean *sequence* don't say *shot;* if you mean *Hollywood style*, don't be satisfied with *classical style*, because the latter term could indicate a specific kind of Hollywood or European movie. Be precise: Say what you mean and avoid words that have little denotative value, like *thing* and *aspect*.

A *connotation* is any association or implication of the word you use. *Film* has for many people sophisticated, intellectual connotations, while *movie* has connotations associated with mass entertainment. Both *Hollywood* and *classical* carry a number of connotations (*commercial* or *establishment*, for instance) that a writer should be aware of when using them. Mack Sennett, the founder of the Keystone Cops, warned against inappropriate critical language when he said there "was a wonder and a miracle" in his films which "no amount of expensive grammar can explain."

Tone

The tone of an essay can vary considerably from the jaunty sarcasm of some newspaper reviewers to the pretentious didacticism of some film theoreticians. *Tone* is the total effect of the words you use and how you use them, and every essay establishes a tone, or "writer's voice." Be conscious of the tone of voice you are adopting in your argument; some tones are less appropriate than others. Sarcasm, humor, and anger are among the least effective tones to use in formulating an engaging and convincing argument. A paper that begins "This so-called art film could never appeal to a normal audience" immediately identifies the writer as someone too prejudiced to make balanced judgments. The same point can be made with a more balanced tone: "The problem with art films is that they may alienate a public used to a more accessible story." A writer needs to find the right compromise between a casual voice and a formal one. The nature of that compromise will depend on you and the specific topic of your essay. Too much slang won't work, nor will pretentious words that you normally don't use. A writer conscious of tone will maintain a consistent one throughout the essay, not changing tone of voice from sentence to sentence or paragraph to paragraph.

Finally, beware of using quotation marks around words to try to create an indirect or clever tone or sarcasm. If you mean that a character behaves like a dominant and oppressive male stereotype, don't be satisfied by simply writing that he is "a 'really liberated' guy." Quotation marks used in this way rarely explain anything. They usually blur what you mean.

Repetitions and Clichés

A common difficulty in word usage is to keep the diction fresh and varied. Experienced writers rely on the *repetition* of key words for emphasis and continuity. But the lazy or uncontrolled repetition of words results in tedious prose: repeated references to "the director" throughout a short passage can be irritating. You can easily correct such repetition by substituting a proper name *(Romero)* or an article *(he)*. When you find yourself locked into unnecessary repetitions, vary your descriptions and phrases. But don't force a change by using terms that do not fit your style.

The tendency to depend on *clichés* is a version of the same problem: the substitution of a quick and unexamined use of language for precise expression. The snatches of jingles and pat quips that we often find in movie reviews are an extreme version of this use of clichés. They indicate how meaningless terms like *blockbuster* or *a film everyone should see* become.

In the following passage, Robin Wood employs several phrases we have all heard before ("very much in question" or "a great pity that"), and he builds his point around the repetition of words like *energy, ridiculous, artist*, and *violence*. Here, however, Wood demonstrates how common expressions can contribute to a relaxed tone and how the repetition of a word sometimes leads to finer distinctions in thought:

> The value of Sam Peckinpah's work is still very much in question; its intensity is not. And art that expresses such energy and passion, such commitment to personal impulse, commands, at least, respectful attention. The Wild Bunch (1969) and Straw Dogs (1971), whatever one's estimate of them, have that combination of candor and force which announces an artist who is not afraid of appearing ridiculous; those who profess to find them no more than ridiculous are perhaps nervously insulating themselves from the films' ferocious and contagious energy. At the same time, one may comment at the outset that it is a great pity that, in the eyes of the public and most critics, Peckinpah's gentler and arguably finest films . . . have been so

overshadowed by the spectacular and explosive violence of the more notorious works—a violence that is certainly a major component of his artistic personality, but by no means the whole story. (771–72)

EFFECTIVE SENTENCES

Economy

A writer should aim at two key stylistic goals: to be economical and to be interesting. Being economical means saying precisely all that you need to say and cutting words and expressions that add no information or serve no stylistic purpose.

Many writers get stuck for words and are not able to come up with sentences that adequately express a thought. When this happens, going back to an outline and talking through your ideas in terms of specific images and sequences will help start the flow of sentences. The inverse problem, however, is equally troublesome: sometimes a writer who spews out words in haphazard fashion loses the meaning of his or her sentence in the process. A critical eye notices that the following sentence is unnecessarily wordy:

> There are many difficult and demanding scenes in this film by Lina Wertmüller, Swept Away (1975), which give the movie an operatic quality.

Cutting and economizing, the writer would revise it to:

> Lina Wertmüller's Swept Away (1975) is a demanding, operatic film.

You can usually eliminate wordiness of this kind by watching out for redundancies, wordy constructions (e.g., "there is"), correctable uses of the passive voice ("Blake Edwards directed *Pink Panther* [1964]," instead of "The *Pink Panther* [1964] was directed by Blake Edwards"), or merely words that could be deleted without changing the sense of a sentence. Reviewing the following passage, the writer should have recognized its extreme wordiness:

> Despite its central and obviously important role in the way a movie communicates, one of the most overlooked and ignored areas of study in film scholarship is proving to be the many variations and appreciable differences in how movie dialogue has been used and how its functions have changed rapidly through history and dramatically from director to director.

Without sacrificing information, the better, more succinct version reads:

> Despite the central role of film dialogue, most scholarship has overlooked its evolution in films and its various uses by different directors.

Varied Sentence Structures

An interesting style requires more than just an interesting subject to write about. It also requires a way of presenting the subject in sentences that dovetail and emphasize your material in the strongest way possible, because holding a reader's interest—always a goal of any writer—requires sentences that present your analysis in its most effective form. Some authors "shoot from the hip," naturally and chattily presenting their points in lively prose. Most of us, however, tend to get stuck in stylistic ruts, of which the most common in student writing is the unvaried use of simple declarative sentences. In order to escape these ruts, we use several stylistic strategies to make our sentences more flexible and emphatic.

Parallels draw attention to the relations between, or the equation of, two or more facts or ideas:

> Hollywood movies have three purposes: to entertain, to make money, and to advertise a way of life. [Do not write "to entertain, to make money, and advertising a way of life."]

Coordination joins two related sentences with a conjunction (*and, but, or*, etc.), the result being a compound sentence and a rhythmic variation in your sentence patterns:

> Hollywood movies are meant primarily to entertain and to make money, and less obviously, they aim to advertise a way of life.

Subordination combines two or more points or sentences into a single complex sentence that redistributes those ideas to deemphasize some points and emphasize others:

> Although Hollywood movies aim to entertain and to advertise a way of life, their primary function is to make money.

In the following sentences, the writer has gotten stuck in sentence structures, and the writing is choppy and tiresome:

> Ingmar Bergman is the premier Swedish filmmaker. He has been active in film and theater since 1944. His most famous movie is probably The Seventh Seal (1956), and this film dramatizes typical Bergman concerns

with theological and social angst. His most visually complicated film is Persona (1966), and it examines that angst as it relates specifically to images, personalities, and the cinema.

Revising these sentences, the writer communicates the material far more effectively and economically through parallels, coordination, and subordination:

> Active in film and theater since 1944, Ingmar Bergman is the premier Swedish filmmaker. Although The Seventh Seal (1956) is his most famous movie, his most visually complicated is Persona; while the first dramatizes typical Bergman concerns with theological and social angst, the second examines that angst as it relates to images, personalities, and the cinema.

In making these sentences a bit more economical, the writer has also made them more emphatic: in the first sentence, by subordinating less important information about Bergman's past; in the second, by creating parallel phrases that compare the two films and by subordinating the less interesting *Seventh Seal*. The original sentences could have been restructured in many ways. Their structure should be determined not only by economy, but by what the writer wishes to emphasize.

When you are composing your first draft from notes and reflections, it is probably best not to labor over finding the exact word or the most economical phrase. At that stage, your objective is to get your ideas down on paper as quickly and as completely as you can. The time for correcting and polishing sentences is usually when you revise that draft, when you should be more sensitive to how you can improve your writing.

COHERENT PARAGRAPHS

In a movie, the elements that compose the mise-en-scène (actors, props, etc.) become part of a shot; many shots develop into a scene and then a sequence; and sequences can be combined to form a narrative. The growth of an essay can be conceptualized according to a similar scheme. Perhaps writing is never quite so schematic; yet, just as an accurate and resourceful use of words leads to lively sentences, well-constructed sentences become unified and coherent paragraphs.

There is no set length for a good paragraph, nor is there an absolutely correct number of paragraphs for a given paper. A 500-word essay normally has four or five paragraphs, and a developed paragraph usu-

ally contains at least four or five sentences. However, the number of paragraphs and their respective lengths will depend on the ideas in your argument. Ideally, the number of paragraphs in an essay follows from a thorough and well-conceived outline. If you have only two or three paragraphs, or very short paragraphs, your argument may be short on good ideas, or those ideas may not have been thought out fully or supported concretely. (Although journalistic writing, such as a newspaper review, frequently relies on very short paragraphs, this is usually *not* the kind of paragraphing appropriate for a critical essay.)

Whether the paragraph has a few sentences or a dozen, it must contain an idea that clearly unites its sentences. This unifying idea should be made explicit in the *topic sentence* of each paragraph, a sentence that pinpoints the guiding concept of the paragraph. When you locate this sentence at the beginning of a paragraph, you help the reader to follow the train of thought throughout the paragraph. Sometimes, your topic sentence will be the second sentence. Very rarely is a topic sentence unnecessary, and in most cases, you should not use, in place of a topic sentence, a *plot sentence* that simply retells some of the plot. Generally, a topic sentence anchors the paragraph and announces its central idea, even if that idea is then developed through two or three other related ideas. Note in the following paragraph that the central idea ("the repose of the Western hero") is clearly identified in the first sentence. Note also how the author creates a smooth transition (from the previous paragraph about the gangster film) through the appropriately placed "by contrast":

> The Western hero, by contrast, is a figure of repose. He resembles the gangster in being lonely and to some degree melancholy. But his melancholy comes from the "simple" recognition that life is unavoidably serious, not from the disproportions of his own temperament. And his loneliness is organic, not imposed on him by his situation but belonging to him intimately and testifying to his completeness. The gangster must reject others violently or draw them violently to him. The Westerner is not thus compelled to seek love; he is prepared to accept it, perhaps, but he never asks of it more than it can give, and we see him constantly in situations where love is at best an irrelevance. If there is a woman he loves, she is usually unable to understand his motives; and he finds it impossible to explain to her that there is no point in being "against" these things: they belong to his world. (Warshow 137)

Here, characteristics of the western hero are described separately: his perspective on life, his breed of loneliness, his feelings about love and violence. Each, however, can be referred to and is subordinate to the central topic of his "repose." Like most good paragraphs, this one features a general and clear beginning and then moves through specific points to a strong and emphatic conclusion.

The next example of paragraphing has a more complicated structure. Note its successful use of transitions ("In more general terms," "yet," "however," etc.) to connect parts of sentences, separate sentences, and separate paragraphs:

> In terms of sound quality, the average film of the mid-forties, whether in Hollywood, France, or England, represented a significant improvement on the original efforts of the late twenties. In more general terms, however, the films of the forties remained the direct descendants of those earlier films. Every step of the process had been improved—from microphones to printers, from amplifiers to loudspeakers—yet the fundamental optical recording and printing technology remained basically the same. Not until after the war, thanks in part to German wartime technology, did the sound recording industry in general and the film sound track in particular take a quantum leap forward with the perfection of magnetic recording techniques. As with all important technological developments, however, the magnetic recording revolution met with immediate economic resistance. There was no question that magnetic recording was easier, used lighter, more mobile equipment, cost less, and produced decidedly better results; theaters, however, were not equipped to play films which substituted a magnetic strip for the traditional optical sound track. Just as Hollywood delayed the coming of sound for years, it has for economic reasons delayed the coming of better sound for decades. Over a quarter of a century after the general availability of magnetic recording technology very few theaters (usually only the high priced, first run, big city variety) are equipped with magnetic sound equipment. Ironically, for years, the average amateur filmmaker working with super-sound equipment has possessed better and more advanced sound reproduction facilities than the neighborhood cinema.
>
> Nevertheless, Hollywood was able to capitalize on the new technology in another way. Though filmmakers around the world continued to use optical sound for distribution prints, they very early began to do all their own recording in the magnetic mode (by the end of 1971, 75 percent of Hollywood's original production recording, music scoring, and dubbing was being done on magnetic recording equipment). Finishing what the playback had begun, magnetic recording divorced the sound track still further from the image and from the image's optical technology. Now, any number of sound sources could easily be separately recorded, mixed, and remixed independently of the image (thus simplifying the manipulation of stereophonic sound now often coupled with the new wide-screen formats). (Altman 48)

These are rather complicated paragraphs, in part because a great deal of information is proffered, in part because more than one idea is at work in the first paragraph. Specifically, the writer is discussing two ideas like a kind of two-sided coin: on one side, there are the advances made in sound technology in the post–World War II period (announced in the opening sentence); on the other side, there is the failure of Hollywood to implement those advances.

The author balances and contrasts these two developments by mapping the logic of their progression from the prewar period to modern times, and he connects them through key transition words like *however*. Notice also how this back-and-forth progression is deftly focused in the middle of the first paragraph with the sentence beginning "There was no question"; this sentence has a parallel structure, its two halves divided by the semicolon, and each side representing a version of the twofold point the paragraph is making. Also, the coherence and vividness of the paragraph are enhanced by numerous concrete details and historical facts. (When you are writing papers more analytical than historical, this kind of information may not be as necessary, available, or appropriate. But always attempt to solidify and flesh out the idea of your topic sentence with hard facts or concrete details from the film.)

Finally, the passage demonstrates a neat transition between the two paragraphs that turns on the word *nevertheless* and the phrase "in another way." Make sure your transitions between sentences and between paragraphs add clarity, coherence, and fluidity to your essay. Using words or phrases specifically suited for this purpose, like *furthermore* or *in fact*, is one way to increase coherence; a second method is repeating key words from the end of the previous paragraph, as this writer does with *Hollywood* and *technology*. Always make sure that your reader can follow a logical transition from one paragraph to the next.

CONCLUDING PARAGRAPHS

For some students, a popular strategy for reaching a conclusion is to rephrase the opening thesis in slightly different words ("Thus, I have shown. . . ."). This approach, however, frequently seems mechanical and dull. A concluding paragraph, like an opening paragraph, is best when it makes your reader attend to it, and to sit up and realize that something interesting has been said that may have implications beyond the bounds of the essay. Some summary is not necessarily a bad idea, especially when an argument has been a bit complicated or involved; even so, earlier ideas should be retrieved not merely to remind the reader of what has been said, but to emphasize a final point, as Dudley Andrew does in this conclusion:

> Thus, despite its apparently hermetic form, *Diary of a Country Priest* situates itself in a cosmic openness. It is a film written across the pages of a notebook, yet it is set in a field of light and sound. The concentration and discipline of the diary allow the curé to attain in his final hours a breadth of soul explicitly measured against his pathetically liberal defrocked friend. His rigorous instrument of self-knowledge—his writing—has brought him into focus with his image and, therefore, has made him one with Christ. It is through a similar textual discipline, this time of cinematic style, that Bresson can in the end reach beyond cinema and be at one with *his* subject, a novel. By going beyond cinema through cinema, he has achieved a revolution in the ethics and potential of adaptation; he has *performed* a novel in sight and sound, not capturing his subject so much as becoming it. (130)

Conclusions often attempt to wrap up a complex argument too neatly. Yet sweeping generalizations are risky. Some of the most effective conclusions close an argument within the range of that particular essay, at the same time opening it to other questions.

In concluding a discussion of Leni Riefenstahl's films and photographic work, Richard Meran Barsam moves carefully from the specific to the general, referring to historical figures and titles, arriving at some definite conclusions about the woman and her work, yet maintaining a relatively balanced and open-minded tone that points the reader toward other questions:

> The Nuba film will be similar to her other work because it will express again the special world that has engaged her imagination since she was a child. Leni Riefenstahl's world is a world apart, a world of crystal grottoes, of men who think they are supermen, of the human body made godlike through film, of elite warriors on a dark and foreign plain. This world exists in fact, but it becomes in her imagination a very different entity. Protected by her belief in that entity, which is, of course, her art, Leni Riefenstahl remains apart from much of the everyday world. She cannot understand why many people in that world will not accept her or her legends; as she publishes her Nuba photographs (to some, a bold and striking act of penance), she thinks that these documents will show her belief in man's honesty, goodness, and oneness with nature. The Nuba photographs do show those aspects, of course, but they are photographs of a disappearing world. Fortunately for all mankind, her photographs of Hitler represent another world that has disappeared, but the world will not forget that she found it necessary, and perhaps even advantageous, to make those pictures and to create the myths that infuse *Triumph of the Will* with its terrifying power. A truly enigmatic woman, Leni Riefenstahl fights against the legend that she has created for herself, fights against it even as it encloses the final years of her life. Leni Riefenstahl is one with her legend, inseparable from the world that she has made. She has what every artist since Daedalus has dreamed of, except the power to fall, to admit error, and to transcend the fragile barrier that stands between art and life. (37)

For some, the final rhetorical flourish here might seem a bit much. But conclusions and openings are always more rhetorical than other paragraphs, and, whether or not they choose a more matter-of-fact tone, writers should strive to get as much out of their words as possible—especially at the crucial points in an essay.

CHECKLIST FOR WRITING AN EFFECTIVE ESSAY

Each writer has personal methods and strategies. The following are some summary guidelines, suggestions, and reminders:

1. Be prepared for a movie. Before you see a film, ask preliminary questions about when and where it was made and about your own expectations concerning it. Ask which of your other interests—technology, art, business—might point you in a good direction when writing about film.
2. Learn to look carefully at the movie and to take notes. Let your general, preliminary questions become more specific and concrete as you respond to the movie. What seems most important in it? What seems most unusual about it?

3. Let your questions lead you to a manageable topic that involves both the themes of the film and its technical and formal features. A topic like "The Search for Identity in *Citizen Kane*" is probably too large for a short essay; a much more compelling topic would be "Kane's Childhood: The Beginning of an Identity Crisis." The more concentrated focus of the second topic will allow you to examine scenes and sequences in detail.

4. Try to view the movie at least one more time after you have decided on a topic. Expand your notes at this point, filling in details you may have missed during your first screening.

5. Keep clarifying your argument; transfer your notes to note cards (or sheets of paper if you prefer) so that you can arrange these notes as a logical and organized group of ideas. Begin your argument with a statement of the problem or question you intend to address. Then, assemble and lay out the specific points of your discussion, using concrete evidence from the movie and your interpretation of it. Good essays usually proceed from the less debatable thematic points to more complex points about style and technique. Remember that you are presuming you have a reader who has seen the movie but will need to be convinced of the point you wish to make.

6. Many writers find it useful to sketch out the organization of an essay in outline form. Depending on your habits and preferences, your outline may be very complete and detailed or rather general and sketchy. If you tend to have trouble with organization and paragraphing, you will want to make it as complete as possible. For each section of the outline, you may even wish to write full sentences as headings; these may later become your topic sentences.

7. Begin to write. For many professionals as well as students, this is the most difficult part of writing, and we all have too many ways to put it off (taking more notes, watching the movie again, sharpening a pencil one more time). Delays do not make the task any easier. Creating an outline can help because it consists of writing, but when it does not help enough, you should write down your ideas freely or randomly. Step back and imagine explaining your topic to a friend. Aim merely to get some sentences on paper; you can re-sort and refine your ideas later.

8. As you write, keep thinking about your subject, pushing your ideas further. Most of us don't know exactly what we think about a complex subject until we start to articulate our thoughts. Writing itself becomes a discovery process of which we should take full advantage. Check your logic by sketching an outline of what you have written. Polish your first paragraph and conclusion. Consider some larger questions about your approach. Is it mainly historical or formalistic? Are you interested in the cultural identity of the film? If you are emphasizing a particular method, decide to what extent your approach should be acknowledged early in your paper.

9. Revise; always revise. Allow as much time as possible between your first draft and your revision of it, preferably a few days. No one writes a perfect draft the first time, and most good writers go through several drafts before they feel comfortable and secure with an essay. If you grow weary, remind yourself: Film scripts may be subjected to a dozen rewrites before a director starts to film, and once the film is made, its editing may become another series of revisions. The time you allow between your first draft and your revision should permit you to look at your essay with fresh eyes. Check your logic, your topic sentences, and your thesis statement (Does it still fit the paper you wrote?). Check to see that you argue and develop your thesis rather than merely assert it. Read through the essay, watching for awkward expressions, poor transitions between sentences and paragraphs, and imprecise words. Are your examples still relevant? Are your quotations accurate? If you have time, put the paper aside again and do one last revision.

NOTE: *If you type your essay on a computer or word processor, it is very important that you revise at least one draft on a hard copy, since errors are easier to spot when the writing is in hard copy.*

10. Type, print out, or write a clean copy, following the guidelines about margins, footnotes, and so on (pp. 154–169). Be certain you are not breaking or bending any rules about plagiarism (pp. 159–162).

11. Proofread your final copy and insert any necessary corrections (pp. 154–156).

Exercises

1. Outline an argument for an essay using headings and subheadings for each section. Use full topic sentences for the headings.

2. Write three different versions of an introductory paragraph so that the thesis becomes more and more specific with each version.