Eugenie Brinkema; Updated 2011

EB's GUIDE TO SCHOLARLY WRITING

This packet contains:

I. How to Do Critical Reading

Critical reading is...

...reading for more than the plot.
...necessary for understanding course material in depth and for writing strong papers.
...a skill that can be taught, practiced, developed, and improved upon — it is learned!

You should ask of any piece of writing:

1. What is the author saying explicitly? What is the author saying implicitly?
2. What is the author *not* saying?
   [The unsaid of a text often being the most important part.]
3. With whom is the author in dialogue (again: explicitly or implicitly)?
4. What is the author's methodology? What kinds of structures are used: logical syllogisms, metaphor and simile, appeals to science or reason, etc.?
5. Where do I think the author is right? And where do I think the author is wrong? (Why?)
   [This question is not a matter of opinion but an examination of where the argument goes astray, oversteps, is illogical, is contradictory, etc.]
6. Under what assumptions is the writer operating? What perspectives are taken for granted?
7. From what position (authoritative, internal, meta-) is the author speaking?
8. What sort of reader is assumed, implied, or addressed?
9. What are the implications of the text's position? What's really at stake here?

Such a list could—and your own list will—go on and on. The point is this: this sort of reading is active, questioning, and intense. It is meant to forge a relationship between you—as reader—and the text and/or author.

Now for practical tips:

1. Read slowly—don't skim. At the same time, don't read so slowly that you get lost in the language of any one sentence. Try to figure out the main points on a paragraph-by-paragraph level. It is to be expected that texts will have to be read twice, or more. That is not a failure or an indication that you're not getting the material; quite the opposite. I like to use a three-part system for my first read-through of a text (though yours may differ): I scan a text before reading it to see if there are subheadings or specific indications about the development the argument will take. Then, I read in depth, taking notes, indicating important passages, writing questions in the margins. Finally, I go back and reread the 2-3 most important sentences, paragraphs, or sections.

2. Use some sort of note-taking system. You probably have one—checks, exclamation points, colored pencils, a separate sheet for marking interesting quotes. It doesn't matter what the system is, only that you find one that works for you, and allows you to come into class days after reading something and remember what struck you at the time. Critical reading includes critical viewing: screening notes are very important as both a cause and record of active thought during the films for this class.

3. Read with an eye towards making distinctions: not everything in a text is equally important (to you or to the author). Again: don't skim. In part, on your first go-through you won't necessarily know what's important; and, sometimes the throwaway example or hidden sentence is the most interesting part of a text! But, at the same time, start to practice creating hierarchies from the mix of conceptual foundations, background information, examples/illustrations, digressions, and ultimate implications in any writing.

4. Try, if possible, to constantly put the author's words into your own. You might especially pay attention to the central point or argument in which she is participating, and the implications of the argument at hand. If you can step away from an article and put the author's argument in your own words, you are in great shape. This is also largely what we'll work on in class with abstract theory—working with it and rephrasing it to make sure that we understand it deeply, not simply that we can repeat phrases from the text.

5. Keep track of questions you have while reading! This is important: don't just skip over difficult passages. Slog through them and mark them to bring up in class. Intellectual curiosity is a fantastic thing—the best critical readers are constantly asking questions of themselves and of any text.

II. General Notes on Papers

• Read the paper topics carefully: you don't have to address every subtopic or sub-question, but the topics will indicate what you *must* cover. I provide you with a lot of sub-questions in order to give you many avenues for thinking about course material. If you don't know where to start with a topic, brainstorming answers or thinking about these sub-questions should help. Again, though, you will not answer all of them, and your paper should remain focused.

• You should rewatch films about which you write, the same way you'd reread passages from a novel or theoretical article.

• Papers are due *in hard copy* in the folder on the front of my office door. The deadline for papers is firm: they will be lowered half a grade for each day that they are late. If you are in exceptional need of an extension, talk to me early and be prepared to make your case. In general, though, as papers address specific sections of our course material, it's important to finish them on time so you can turn your attention to new conceptual areas and material. In turn, however, my responsibility to you is to turn these papers back as quickly as possible so that you can think about how to improve for your next assignment and meet with me to discuss those adjustments.

• Finally, remember to think and write about the texts for this class in the manner in which we analyze them in our seminar: in other words, as readers and thinkers in the humanities. Be careful not to slip into other discourses in your papers: for example, you would not want to produce a sociological analysis of violence or talk about cognitive science and what it suggests about shock. You want to stay focused on reading the films, novels, and theoretical articles. You will want to think about textuality; affect; visual and narrative form; style; aesthetics, ethics, and politics; meaning (and non-meaning); etc., and keep interrogating the theoretical terms we've explored.

III. Literature Faculty Policy on Plagiarism

Plagiarism—the use of another's intellectual work without acknowledgement—is a serious offense. It is the policy of the Literature Faculty that students who plagiarize will receive an F in the subject, and that the instructor will forward the case to the Committee on Discipline. Full acknowledgement for all information obtained from sources outside the classroom must be clearly stated in all written work submitted and in all oral presentations. This includes images or texts in other media as well as materials collected online. All ideas, arguments, and direct phrasings taken from someone else's work must be identified and properly footnoted. Quotations from other sources must be clearly marked as distinct from the student's own work.

For further guidance on the proper forms of attribution, consult the style guides available in the Writing and Communication Center http://humanistic.mit.edu/wcc, and the MIT Website on Plagiarism located at: http://web.mit.edu/writing/Special/plagiarism.html

→ The above is the official policy of the Literature Department. This is my addendum to it: this is not a research class where you are expected to seek out secondary sources; the only quotations in your papers should be from our primary texts, which is the material on our syllabus (things like films, novels, criticism, theoretical essays). You will primarily be engaging in close readings, argument and analysis, and theoretical speculation. There are a lot of materials out there on the texts on which we are working—I would advise you not to consult them, as wikis, imdb.com, and internet postings are notorious for banalities if not errors. If you have a sincere question about how to use a material—whether paraphrase needs to be cited, or how to reference information that is not yours, but encountered in a footnote or some such—just ask me: teaching you how to cite materials is part of my job and I'm happy to talk about any writing matters. Likewise, if you want to read more theoretical or critical work on an area, I'm happy to recommend authors and even specific texts. But you must cite all material that you did not originally create. The vast majority of plagiarism cases results from a dangerous combination of stress and procrastination that turns over into desperation. Do not do it. The zero tolerance policy is real.

IV. What is Scholarship?

Your papers for this class are scholarship. They are not film or book reviews, nor should they consist of plot summary—they are analytical scholarly papers supported by close analyses of literature and visual texts. This is the standard by which they will be judged, but I don't presume that you already know what this means, so I am going to talk a bit here about what scholarship is (and isn't).

1. Scholarly writing takes the most general form of a **dialogue**—your paper is in conversation with the academic writing that came before it, and you should position your work in relation to those other texts. (*In general; see the starred point below.) The most general form this takes is often referred to as the "They say, I say" model. In other words: "Freud says X about *das Unheimliche*, but I say Y [because...]." Or "While Rony and Young argue A, B, and C, I say D, E, and F [because...]." The best scholarly writing not only identifies differences as the conversation occurs, but always also elaborates on the *significance* of those differences. The "They say, I say" model is ideally not an example of what Freud called "the narcissism of minor differences"—rather, it should be a significant statement of difference. That is not to say that you can't agree with the theorists about which you're writing: "They say, I say" can also be used to apply a theory in new ways, to complicate it or pose questions to it, or to defend a principle using new or different evidence. The very fact that you—and not someone else—is writing your paper should mean that there is always an "I say" in there. (And yes, you can write "**I** will argue" or "**I** claim.")

* Even if your essay focuses on primary source material, and you are not engaging with secondary interpretations of the texts, this dialogue can be made implicit. For example:

"Although the shower scene in *Psycho* seems to align violence with the cinematic apparatus through editing that cuts up the image, I want to argue through a close reading of Arbogast's murder that violence is more spectacularly rendered in the film through continuous, uncut shots." That "although" with which the sentence begins suggests how your argument might have gone otherwise or a claim someone might make about a text; just an acknowledgement of that presents your work in the context of a dialogue.

2. Scholarly writing has a **thesis**. A thesis is an argument, which means that someone could disagree with your paper's central claim. So, for example: "*Citizen Kane* is organized as a mystery around the detection of the meaning of the word 'rosebud'." is *not* a thesis. It's a statement of reasonably verifiable truth. Few (if any) people would ever disagree with this statement; if they did, you'd wonder if they had seen the film. However, "*Citizen Kane* is structured around the detection of the meaning of the word 'rosebud,' which makes it appear as though the obsession of the film is a problem of missing knowledge about an object; in fact, however, I will argue that the editing and camerawork of the final three scenes suggest an indifference to the meaning of that word. Furthermore, I will conclude by suggesting that the missing knowledge that does organize the film is not about the meaning of a word but about the status of maternal love, an absent certainty that is never resolved in the film."—That's a thesis. Someone could disagree with it and argue otherwise. And, thus, the conversation could continue. That's the thing: the first point above about what scholarly work is, and this point about needing a thesis—they're related. Because the only way that scholarly conversation can continue is if people risk making arguments with which other people can conceivably disagree and debate. A good thesis always takes such a risk: it makes a claim against which others might argue. (The very best papers, in fact, will build this structure into the argument, anticipating counter-arguments and then arguing against them with support, or even accommodating evidence to the contrary of an argument, while still defending the broader strength of the central claim.) You have to take such a risk to write a good scholarly paper. I will be looking for it in everything you write this semester.

3. Scholarly writing uses evidence to support a paper's central argument. That evidence varies by discipline, but for this class you should be using close textual analysis as evidence to support your arguments. That is, you will be closely analyzing literary and media texts, and your evidence will vary but likely include quotations from literary texts, in addition to paraphrased arguments, attention to the language and/or logic used, and observations about large-scale textual structure. The second kind of close textual analysis you will be performing is of films, and this kind of close analysis is a bit trickier than with the literary texts. Writing about visual media always involves a sort of translation: you can quote directly from Homer or Shelley, but without frame stills, you are always writing *about* (in other words, around) a film text. Some film theorists (Raymond Bellour) even call the cinematic object about which one writes "a skeleton," even a dead or "unfindable" text (a missing text). You will have to find a way to talk about the films, paying close attention to the things on your "How to Watch a Film Handout"—the visual, aural, narrative, ideological, etc. dimensions of the film. You don't have to (and shouldn't) talk about all those aspects every time; you will edit and choose from your notes to find the evidence most relevant for the argument at hand. But when you make a claim in this class, this is how you should support it. This is also why taking really detailed screening notes is so important—they are the equivalent of the thoughtful marginalia on a marked-up page.

4. Scholarly writing has a conclusion that presses on the implications of proving the thesis. In other words, let's say, from above, that you do indeed demonstrate through close analysis and logical argumentation that *Citizen Kane* gives us one missing thing in order to distract from the more ephemeral, but infinitely more important, missing maternal affect. You now have to answer the charge posed by the most difficult reader you can imagine, the one who gets very close to your face and demands, "So what? *Why* should I care that you proved your argument? What does it matter?" You must answer this feisty reader. It is never enough that you are writing for an assignment; your scholarly work should have something intellectually and personally at stake.

Your conclusion should talk about the significance of your thesis being correct—this can involve new questions that now must be posed (which you may or may not start to answer yourself), or new complications that arise, or new directions scholarship could take your argument. A strong conclusion might press on or tease out the larger implications of your argument. Let's say you make an argument about time in narratives about heroic figures: that might give you a ground for talking about temporality and finitude; about whether time erases or preserves heroic deeds; about ways that time itself makes figures seem heroic; the way heroism itself involves a relation to time (an overcoming of it, perhaps); the way temporal forms in the organization of plot in relation to story change our perception of heroism over the course of the text; or any number of other concerns. What might make another reader care about your thesis as much as you do? Without gesturing at those questions, your paper is a mere exercise; with such gestures, however, your work becomes important, original scholarship about which other scholars will care.

5. Scholarly writing is readable. That means it is free of grammatical or spelling problems; it develops a logical and coherent argument, wherein each sentence flows to the next, and each paragraph builds on the previous one; and it has a compelling and necessary conclusion that broadens the concerns of the essay. It uses correct citation form—which means the author's last name and a page number for each quotation; for example, (Brinkema 5) or (Ellis 334)—and it paraphrases correctly where needed. Your paper topics are large, sometimes with several sub-questions. You don't have to touch on every subtopic, but you should pay attention to what the question directs you to focus on. One way to keep your papers concise and focused is to have a narrow, specific thesis. Make one strong argument instead of a series of claims, each of which gets less space than it deserves. Second, avoid plot summary at all costs. Assume I know the texts about which you are writing. Learn to paraphrase well: it shows me that you understand the material well enough to rephrase it, and it also takes up much less space than lengthy quotations. When you're doing a close reading, cut it down ruthlessly to the bare minimum necessary to make your point; the evidence should, every time, be in support of the argument for which it is presented. Long sentences and long papers are often meandering thoughts trying to find an object; that's fine in a draft and an important part of thinking through complex ideas. But in a final paper, be specific and concise and get right to your central points.

6. Finally, scholarly writing should also, at its best, be exciting, interesting, and compelling. You should think about your writing *as* writing—all writing is creative. Scholarly writing has no ideal or perfect form. Forget structures like "the 5-paragraph essay" or rules like "Your conclusion should restate everything you've said in your paper." Feel free to use the first person; there is a clear "I" making your argument, so use it. Every paper will follow an organic and logical development of its central thesis. And the words you choose, and the phrasing you choose—its rhythm, its pacing—will all affect how your work is read. Consider going to the Writing Center to workshop your paper before it is due. They offer one-on-one consulting and meeting with them will inevitably make your work stronger (http://writing.mit.edu/wcc). At minimum, you should reread your papers several times before turning them in—proofreading, yes; but also editing, changing, refining, modifying, continually improving your work. Ask questions back to your papers; think like a reader. Thinking and writing are not separable, which means that clear, rigorous, deep thinking will be reflected in a paper that is clear, rigorously argued, deep, and also exciting, interesting, original, provocative, and compelling.

Your papers for this class are scholarship, as I wrote above. They should cover material that is interesting to you, make claims in which you really believe, and be the very best examples of your thinking and writing. This is the standard to which I hold my students, but I will also make every effort to help you achieve these goals—so come talk to me early and often, in office hours or by appointment, if you would like to work on your arguments or papers together.

One final note: enjoy the process. As scholars, your job is to think. It's a good way to spend one's time. I look forward to seeing the outcome.

V. Common Errors and Solutions

*Four common **writing** errors / and their solutions:*

1. Problem: Vagueness or speaking too broadly
   Solution: Have a strong, concrete, narrow, specific thesis. Keep your focus on this argument throughout the paper. Reread your introductory paragraph after you've finished writing the conclusion to make sure you end up arguing what you said you were going to argue.
   Outline or plan your paper before you start writing *or* try making a reverse outline: after the paper is done, create a quick map of its structure and see if that overall shape makes sense.

2. Problem: Mechanical Errors
   Solution: Proofread and edit well. Don't finish the paper so close to the deadline that you can't reread it at least once to make sure it's clean and error-free. We all write sloppy emails from time to time, but a formal paper is a different beast. (Academics find their articles are not accepted at journals if submitted with punctuation or spelling errors, for example. Graduate school applications are routinely eliminated due to writing errors in the personal statement.)
   I have never given an A to a paper with more than one really obvious spelling mistake: it takes little time and effort to polish a paper in this way. Proofreading is a way of representing your ideas well; you might think of it as a matter of intellectual self-respect.

3. Problem: Thinness of Logic
   Solution: Acknowledge counter-arguments or evidence against your thesis, and respond to hypothetical claims (account for textual details that contradict you). It can be especially useful (and interesting) to do this in a conclusion: now that you've proven your argument, you can consider any problems/holes/quibbles/complications with it, and start to answer those as a way of broadening your concerns and giving your argument credibility.

4. Problem: No Impact/Weak Conclusion
   Solution: Answer the "So what?" question that justifies and ties together all of your analysis and makes your reader care about the essay's argument. Keep the big picture in mind at all times: what is at stake in demonstrating your argument. What kinds of new questions or issues does it raise or allow us to now think about? A paper is shaped like an hourglass: it starts with a broad problematic, moves towards a thesis (the most "narrow" part of the paper), builds up again with textual evidence, adding more and more evidence and analysis, and coming to the conclusion, which is broad again and addresses wider or larger concerns.

*Five common **media studies** errors / and their solutions:*

1. Problem: Ignoring media specificity
   Solution: Don't treat film like a purely narrative art form or a purely visual art form. Take account of a medium's totality and specificity—use the language and ideas specific to your medium. Your screening notes will be helpful for identifying specific shots, scenes, visual traits, sonic traits, formal/structural/temporal traits, and narrative issues that are important in your chosen film.

2. Problem: All Plot Summary
   Solution: You don't need to summarize the plot or recount every detail for your papers—assume I know the texts about which you are writing. If your retelling of plot is important, focus on significant sections only and contextualize why that redescription matters. Spend most of your time on argument and analysis.

3. Problem: Not Understanding the Assignment
   Solution: There are many ways of analyzing media, and the entire process—the notes you take, how you pare them down, the thesis you posit, the evidence you use—will depend on whether you're writing a close analysis of a short scene, an ideological analysis with reference to theory, or a historical analysis of one director's work. Read the assignment carefully. Be sure you are clear on the kind of analytic, critical-theoretical, close-analysis type of assignment I'm looking for here.

4. Problem: All Observation
   Solution: Make sure to tie your observations into your argument (*Why* does the lighting matter? How is your argument supported by specific textual workings?). Don't summarize details as though you were transcribing your screening notes—make your observations support your thesis. (It's difficult, but you will do yourself a favor if you learn to leave out observations if they do not support your main point. Editing is not just for late in the writing process—omitting irrelevant, even if interesting, observations makes for a clearer argument and paper.)

5. Problem: Essentializing
   Solution: Don't essentialize formal observations. (E.g., a high angle shot sometimes indicates a position of mastery, but not always. The color red may signify anger or rage, but not necessarily.) Pay attention to the specific workings of any specific film text, and don't assume a universal or consistent palette of meanings. Instead, offer analysis to support your claim that X implies or produces Y in a specific shot, scene, text, genre, etc. Context matters! Look for patterns, repetitions, structural logic, etc.

VI. How to Cite Materials:

Use parenthetical citations in the body of your paper. Normally, those citations include the author's last name and the page number from which the quote was taken. However, omit the author's last name when you use it in the text. For example:

Brinkema says that all college students should study horror films (5).
Brinkema argues, "It would be a travesty to leave college having never studied horror films" (5).
Some instructors even contend that "it would be a travesty" to graduate from college bereft of a rigorous horror education (Brinkema 5).

> In his paper on how horror films disturb the sleep of college students, Smith derides Brinkema's seemingly hyperbolic claim that "It would be a travesty to leave college having never studied horror films" (qtd. 10).

—In other words, in the last case, Brinkema is quoted on page 10 of Smith's article. Since Brinkema and Smith are named in-text, only the page is needed, but as it's a quote from a person other than the article writer, you use "qtd." and the page number.

Or, if Brinkema were not named in the text, it would look like this:

In his paper on how horror films disturb the sleep of college students, Smith argues against the position that "It would be a travesty to leave college having never studied horror films" (Brinkema, qtd. 10).

• Footnotes or endnotes should be used sparingly and for explanatory or extra information that distracts from the flow of your paper's main argument—not for citations. You can use footnotes if you have "extra" information to offer, but you don't have to have them in your papers at all.

• Finally, after your last paragraph, move down to a new page and start a Works Cited list.

It will look like this:

Works Cited

Arbus, Diane. *Diane Arbus: An Aperture Monograph*. Ed. Doon Arbus and Marvin Israel. New York: Aperture, 1972.
Bonitzer, Pascal. "Hitchcockian Suspense." *Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Lacan...But Were Afraid to ask Hitchcock*. Ed. Slavoj Zizek. London: Verso, 2000.
Cixous, Hélène. "Castration or Decapitation?" *Psychoanalysis and Woman, a Reader*. Ed. Shelley Saguaro. New York: New York University Press, 2000.
Dadoun, Roger. "Fetishism in the Horror Film." *Fantasy Cinema*. Ed. James Donald. London: British Film Institute, 1989.
Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinema 2: the Time-Image*. Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galetta. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989.
Freud, Sigmund. "The Uncanny." *Writings on Art and Literature*. Ed. Werner Hamacher and David E. Wellbery. Fwd. Neil Hertz. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997.

→ The entries are alphabetical by last name. They include author name, article or book title, title of anthology if it's an article from one, place of publication, publisher, and date of copyright. Normally, you would do this for every entry, but if it's from an article we read and you don't have all of the information at hand, you can just do author's name, title of article, title of anthology (if indicated) and year of publication. However, for outside reading, you must provide full entries. You do not need to put films in your list of works cited.

VII. Common Mechanical Errors:

These sorts of errors make it difficult for any reader to follow your argument, so you need to learn to avoid them through scrupulous editing.

- it's v. its: the former means "it is"; the latter is possessive (*It's* a cold day today. Look at the snowman: *its* nose is frozen.)

- then v. than: the former is sequential or causal; the latter is comparative (I went to the store, *then* to the bank. If all men are mortal and Socrates is a man, *then* Socrates is mortal. I like Socrates more *than* you do.)

- their v. there v. they're: the first is possessive, the second is about place, the third is a contraction for "they are" (I went to *their* party; it was weird. When I got *there,* everyone was standing on their heads. *They're* all nuts.)

- effect v. affect: almost always, the former is a noun, the latter a verb ("What are the effects of watching TV?" "I don't know; it probably affects us a lot."). "Affect" as a noun generally means emotions or feelings.

- Don't use single quotes, except when you are quoting within a quote: "'Hi,' she said."

- No contractions in formal papers! In the professional or postgraduate world, you will never go wrong being on the formal side of things.

- Article titles should be put in quotes (and not italicized or underlined): "Critique of Violence". Book titles and film titles (*Psycho*) should be underlined or italicized (but not both; italics are better).

- "Modern" is a specific historical time period (its boundaries are debatable). Current media is referred to as "present-day" or "contemporary" (or "postmodern").

- Possessives need apostrophes. For example: viewers pleasure. That's incorrect. If it's one viewer, it should read "viewer's pleasure", or, if you're talking about several viewers, it should read "viewers' pleasure."

- Avoid ending sentences or clauses with prepositions (in, of, to, from, with, etc.)—you want to move that word earlier and add "which" or "whom"... So: instead of "You are the person I'm fond of", you should write, "You are the person of whom I am fond." Or, instead of "That is the book I read a lot of", you should write "That is the book of which I read a lot." It may sound stilted, and there are exceptions to the rule for its use, but it is correct, and for good reason—think about the order in which you get information in the correct version: those prepositions tell us crucial information about the object of the sentence ("That is the building I jumped from" is a very different sentence from "That is the building I jumped to"), and should therefore be given to readers early on in a sentence.

- Commas and periods go inside quotation marks. Other punctuation goes outside the quotation marks, unless part of the quote itself. Sentence punctuation goes after the parenthetical citation. For example:
  Freud writes, "The Uncanny is that class of things..." (32).
  Freud writes, "The Uncanny is that class of things..." (32); this suggests that...

VII. *Frequently Asked Questions (and a few answers...)*

How do you Grade?

I have high standards for all of you, and over the course of the semester, we'll work together to improve your analytical reading, thinking and writing. So wherever you start, know that it is not only possible but likely you will improve, especially if you come talk to me about my comments so that the next paper is stronger. I take MIT's definition of grades seriously, and there is no grade inflation in my classes. I don't think it does you any favors to artificially amplify grades; if you get a high mark in my class, you can trust that the work you've produced is really accomplished.

It is not enough to have a thesis (or argument), though that is important; you'll also be asked to defend it rigorously and creatively, using close textual analysis, and then expand into a conclusion that presses on the implications of that argument being well-defended. By the end of the semester, you should be able to follow and flourish in that form, which will serve you well in your major, in other classes in the humanities, and in future analytic projects that require sustained attention to putting forth and defending an argument.

A grade of a D suggests real problems in completing the assignment and a paper without a thesis or that does not use textual evidence at all or very much; a C suggests adequate performance—a decent argument; sufficient, if unsurprising or obvious evidence; a B suggests a good paper, one that showed a solid understanding of the material and some creative engagement with evidence in support of the central thesis; an A suggests exceptional work and either a profound, rigorous defense; broad synthesis of textual material; creative readings; or all three.

Can I talk to you while working on papers? Can I run my thesis by you?

Yes and yes! My office hours are on the syllabus, and I am almost always available on other days throughout the week. If you can't make office hours, just email me to ask a question or run your thesis by me or to make an appointment to talk in person. I like talking to my students!

What do your comments mean?

If I wrote "awk" or "grammar," there was something amuck in your sentence, grammatically. "Proofread" indicates several errors within a short span of time; heed this, because in future papers writing errors will be taken more seriously, as you've been put on notice to polish your work. A question mark, especially in relation to a phrase, means it is unclear what the subject is (general reference errors usually take this form, i.e. an unattributed "this," or "it") or I'm just not sure what you're saying. My marginal comments usually take three forms: check marks to indicate an interesting or clear argument; counter-evidence or suggestions for thinking about other ways of interpreting textual evidence; or questions trying to tease out what you're trying to say. Often, the better the paper, the more I write, so marginal comments are there to get you thinking, not as punitive or assessment-based remarks.

The final page, on which I write a longer paragraph, should be read carefully: I articulate what is strong in a paper (so you know what you can build on; so you can keep doing it) and also where, specifically, I'm looking for improvement in future papers. I hope these comments are helpful to you—you may want to keep these papers and refer to them explicitly when working on your other papers for this course. And again, if you have questions about something I've written, or are not sure how to make the suggested improvements, please come talk to me.

What did you mean when you said I need to use stronger textual evidence?

If you can write your paper from memory, without opening a novel or poring through detailed screening notes, that's a good sign that you're not hewing close enough to the text and your textual evidence to support your argument will be too vague, weak or both. Generalities are not your friend in analytic papers. You want to be specific: use specific formal figures, specific shots or scenes, specific quotations or episodes. Keep in mind the kinds of things we talk about in our class meetings: we turn to specific pages, or talk about specific chapter titles or epigraphs; we attend to language used, patterns and repetitions, beginnings and endings, formulations related to speaking or narrating; we note uses of color or sound in films; and so forth. When we talk about a page in class, be sure to make note of it unless you have already in your text; your pages should be very marked up as you read to keep you thinking and attending to details; and then, as you get into your paper, pull evidence from the text and evaluate it for the best evidence to support your argument, whatever it may be. Bonus points for either synthesizing large amounts of material (i.e. noting a structure or formulation that reappears throughout the text, creating a large-form problem) or for using surprising evidence that shows a nuanced or original take on the material. Texts do not contain meaning: they make it, formally, and you generate it, critically, in your interpretation(s); feel free to read idiosyncratically, as long as you defend your claims well.

What did you mean when you said I need to "push" my conclusion?

The very best writers learn to read their own work as though it were written by another, and they learn how to "press against" or "press on" their own arguments. When you finish your paper, in an ideal world, you'd set it aside for at least a few hours; then, you'd come back to it, sit down, and read it from start to finish as though you had not written it: you'd pose questions to it (Really? Is that always true? What does it mean that that argument requires we ignore the second half of the text?). You might then refine your argument to be more persuasive, or incorporate (and answer) counter-evidence to your claims. You also would want to ask the "So what?" question I wrote of in the scholarly writing section: why does your argument matter? What new questions does it pose? Is there anything peculiar about your argument that might now, in a conclusion, need to be addressed (have you identified something that opens up new issues)? Conclusions end, as introductions begin, with broad problematics; feel free to speculate on or wonder about the very argument you've made. Think with it, even after you've written it; write that down. Papers need to be reread, even after they've been written. When we talk about editing and revising, that re- is what's important: attend to your papers not once, but *again*. Your work will absolutely get stronger for it. (It is also the most fun and exciting part of the writing process, in my opinion.)

CMS.840 / 21L.435 At the Limit: Violence in Contemporary Representation
Fall 2013