Introduction to Film: Money, Work, & the Meaning of Life

Dr. Everett Hamner
Western Illinois University, Spring 2017, Wednesdays 12:30-3
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General Catalog Description & Prerequisites

Screening and discussion of films from around the world, introducing students to selected traditions, questions of social justice, and methods of interpretation.

Specific Description & Goals

This course has two primary aims: (1) to deepen students’ understanding of the unique language of cinema (and television) and the formal elements that allow this genre to remain a major force in contemporary culture; and (2) to bring students with a wide range of disciplinary interests, including business, technology, and communication as well as the arts and sciences, into rich conversations about money, financial markets, and class in contemporary America; about personal values and purposes in making career decisions; and about the depths of individual character on which a cohesive, sustainable society depends. Each meeting, in other words, will feature extended attention to both what cinema is saying and how it is being said.

In pursuing these formal and thematic purposes, we will ask such questions as:

- How do screenwriting, cinematography, editing, sound design, visual effects, acting choices, and other cinematic elements shape a given work’s impact?
- How does becoming conscious of these individual elements transform our experiences of film?
- How does cinema invite us to reconsider common assumptions about the value of money, the purpose of work, the systems that organize human society, and the ultimate goals and meanings to which we commit ourselves?
- What are the implications of our film-watching experiences for how we understand corporations and their employees, the wealthy and the impoverished, the healthy and the disabled, men and women, and ethnic majorities and immigrant groups?
Reading & Assignment Schedule

PLEASE NOTE:
~“VIEWING,” “READING,” or “ONLINE” = watch, read, or complete in full BEFORE class
~“IN CLASS” = no preparation required beyond accessing texts (print or bring electronically)
Streaming/disc availability: (A)=Amazon, (N)=Netflix, (H)=HBO; (R)=Rivershare libraries, with # copies

Previews

1st WEEK, JAN 18th: BINOCULAR VISION: THE HOW SHAPES THE WHAT

IN CLASS:
~This course’s primary and secondary aims
~Small group introductions (using introductory survey handout)
~Syllabus review and discussion of goals and assignments

Double Feature #1: Don’t Be Ordinary

2nd WEEK, JAN 25th: INSIDE THE PHOTOGRAM

VIEWING: ~Dead Poets Society (1989) (H) (A, rent/buy) (N, dvd only) (R, 9 dvd copies)
~Screenwriting (won), Best Picture (nom), Director (nom), Actor (nom)

READING: ~Ed Sikov, Film Studies: An Introduction intro & ch 1, “Mise-en-scène: Within the Image”

WRITING: ~Journal entry #1: As described in Sikov pp. 21-23, write one paragraph of 250-300 words analyzing any single frame in Dead Poets Society. If at all possible, include the frame at the top of the entry, either by taking a screenshot (preferable) or using a phone camera/etc. to take a photo of your TV/computer display screen (if necessary).

IN CLASS:
~Composition in storytelling: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CvLQJReDhic
~From script to screen: http://www.dailyscript.com/scripts/dead_poets_final.html

3rd WEEK, FEB 1st: CAMERA MOVEMENT

~Screenwriting (nom), Cinematography (nom), Sound (nom)

READING: ~Sikov, Film Studies ch 2, “Mise-en-scène: Camera Movement”

WRITING: ~Journal entry #2: Much as described in Sikov pp. 34-37, pick any sequence in Amélie of 30-60 seconds and describe each movement of the camera therein, using only 250-300 words. Then, in 2-3 sentences more, say how you think this pattern may impact viewers.

IN CLASS:
~Color in storytelling: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aXgFcNUwqX0
~Color and camera movement: “The Look of Amelie” (DVD special features, 13 min)
### Double Feature #2: People Before Things

#### 4th WEEK, FEB 8th: CINEMATOGRAPHY

**VIEWING:** ~ *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008) *(A, rent/buy) (N, dvd only) (R, 8 dvd, 1 blu-ray copies)*
- Cinematography (won), Best Picture (won), Director (won), Screenwriting (won), Editing (won), Music (won), Sound (won)

**READING:** ~ Sikov, *Film Studies* ch 3, “Mise-en-scène: Cinematography”

**WRITING:** ~ Journal entry #3: After reading Sikov pp. 53-54, pick two frames from one scene of *Slumdog Millionaire* in which you think cinematography and mise-en-scène are especially revealing. Using the film vocabulary you have developed so far, explain how these two images (and their relationship) illuminate non-obvious elements of the film’s meaning.

**IN CLASS:** ~ How does *Slumdog Millionaire*’s status as a “foreign film” compare to that of *Amelie*?
~ What do *Dead Poets Society, Amelie,* & *Slumdog* say about money, work, & meaning?

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#### 5th WEEK, FEB 15th: EDITING

**VIEWING:** ~ *Up in the Air* (2009) *(A, free on prime) (N, dvd only) (R, 16 dvd, 1 blu-ray copies)*
- Editing (nom), Best Picture (nom), Director (nom), Screenwriting (nom), Actor (nom), Supporting Actress (2 noms)

**READING:** ~ Sikov, *Film Studies* ch 4, “Editing: From Shot to Shot”

**WRITING:** ~ Journal entry #4: After reading Sikov pp. 70-73, pick a sequence of 30-60 seconds from *Up in the Air* and describe a set of 5-10 shots therein, using a total of 350-400 words. Then, in 2-3 sentences, say what impact you believe the sequence’s editing pattern has.

**IN CLASS:** ~ Quiz #1
~ The art of editing: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nnXEIlCrEgA](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nnXEIlCrEgA)
~ A “two-minute tone poem”: “Shadowplay: Before the Story” (2.5 min)
~ The choice to delete a scene: “Spacesuit” (2 min)
### Double Feature #3: Waking Up Hurts

#### 6th WEEK, FEB 22:: SOUND DESIGN

**VIEWING:** ~*Fight Club* (1999) (A, rent/buy) (R, 5 dvd, 1 blu-ray copies)
- Sound effects editing (nom)

**READING:** ~Sikov, *Film Studies* ch 5, “Sound”

**WRITING:** ~Journal entry #5: After reading Sikov pp. 84-88, pick a sequence of 30-60 seconds from *Fight Club* in which you think sound particularly matters. Then, in 250-300 words, turn the sound off and describe a set of 5-10 shots therein. Next, copy and paste the description below the first one, and after listening to the sound with no picture, go back through the description and add at least 100 words in **bold** that includes observations about sound. Finally, in 2-3 sentences, summarize how you hear the sound impacting the meaning.

**IN CLASS:** ~Film Sound Techniques and Theory: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nkI-vRPF7sE](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nkI-vRPF7sE)
~”A Hit in the Ear: Ren Klyce and the Sound Design of *Fight Club*”: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vvnszCoXpw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vvnszCoXpw)

#### 7th WEEK, MAR 1:: NARRATIVE

**VIEWING:** ~*Birdman* (2014) (A, rent/buy) (N, dvd only) (R, 15 dvd, 3 blu-ray copies)
- Screenwriting (won), Best Picture (won), Director (won), Cinematography (won), Actor (nom), Supporting Actor (nom), Supporting Actress (nom), Sound Mixing (nom), Sound Editing (nom)

**READING:** ~Sikov, *Film Studies* ch 6, “Narrative: From Scene to Scene”

**WRITING:** ~Journal entry #6: After reading Sikov pp. 101-102, write a 250-300-word discussion of the effect of *Birdman’s* self-presentation as if the whole film were a single, uncut take. Usually, a film’s editing creates more distinctions between its plot (the order in which it conveys events) and its story (the internal, “diegetic” chronology or order of events that would have to have occurred). How does the film reveal its characters’ backstories through other strategies instead?

**IN CLASS:** ~”Birdman: All Access” (DVD special feature, 33.5 min)
~What do *Up in the Air*, *Fight Club*, & *Birdman* say about money, work, & meaning?
Double Feature #4: Violence Is Systemic

8th WEEK, MAR 8th: SCREENPLAY, PART I

VIEWING: ~Margin Call (2011) (A, rent/buy) (N, dvd only) (R, 3 dvd copies)

Screenwriting (nom)

READING: ~Sikov, Film Studies ch 7, “From Screenplay to Film”

IN CLASS: ~Quiz #2 (covering material since Quiz #1)

~ Inside Job (2010)  Best Feature-Length Documentary (won)

(SPRING BREAK)

9th WEEK, MAR 22nd: SCREENPLAY, PART II


Screenwriting (won), Best Picture (nom), Director (nom), Actor (nom), Editing (nom)

READING: ~The Big Short (screenplay) (http://www.paramountguilds.com/pdf/the-big-short.pdf)

WRITING: ~Journal entry #7: After reading Sikov pp. 113-15, segment any 20-minute-plus section of either Margin Call or The Big Short, using roughly 250-300 words (see also the example of pp. 108-110). Then in 2-3 sentences, choose one segment and explain how its shift in time and place affects the impact/significance of the segments immediate before and after it.

OR

Compare the experience of reading The Big Short as a screenplay vs. seeing the final cut of the film. What comes through more clearly in one than the other?

IN CLASS: ~What do Margin Call, Inside Job, & The Big Short say about money, work, & meaning?

Double Feature #5: Down Is Not Out

10th WEEK, MAR 29th: FILMMAKERS & AUTEUR THEORY


Actor (nom), Supporting Actress (nom)

READING: ~Sikov, Film Studies ch 8, “Filmmakers”

WRITING: ~Journal entry #8: After reading Sikov pp. 126-28, identify a favorite director for whom you have seen 2+ films (if unsure, use imdb.com and look up some favorite films). Then, in 250-300 words, and using 2+ films as examples, describe what you view as key elements of the director’s style, including thematic concerns and technical preferences.

IN CLASS: ~Excerpts, “Within the Ring” (DVD special features, 43 min)

~Aronofsky as auteur: The Wrestler in dialogue with The Fountain and other works
### 11th WEEK, APR 5th: PERFORMANCE, PART I

**VIEWING:** ~Million Dollar Baby (2004) (A, rent/buy) (N, dvd only) (R, 7 dvd copies)
- Actress (won), Supporting Actor (won), Best Picture (won), Director (won)

**READING:** ~Sikov, Film Studies ch 9, “Performance”

**WRITING:** ~Argumentative Paper, Step 1: an initial, very rough mess of thoughts about what texts & questions interest you most, due online (under “Discussions”) by 11 a.m. Wed 4/5

**IN CLASS:** ~Quiz #3 (covering material since Quiz #2)
~The NYT on “The Year’s Most Captivating Film Performances”


### Double Feature #6: There Are Other Ways

### 12th WEEK, APR 12th: PERFORMANCE, PART II

**VIEWING:** ~Dallas Buyers Club (2013) (A, rent/buy) (N, dvd only) (R, 12 dvd, 4 blu-ray copies)
- Actor (won), Supporting Actor (won), Screenwriting (won), Best Picture (nom), Screenwriting (nom)

**WRITING:** ~Argumentative Paper, Step 2: firm description of what two films you will compare and a list of what interests you most about them formally and thematically (at least one page), due online by 11 a.m. Wed 4/12

**IN CLASS:** ~What do The Wrestler, Million Dollar Baby, & Dallas say about money, work, & meaning?
~From conversation to essay-writing, or, how to grow a thesis

### 13th WEEK, APR 19th: GENRE & SPFX

**VIEWING:** ~District 9 (2009) (A, rent/buy) (N, dvd only) (R, 5 dvd copies)
- Visual Effects (nom), Best Picture (nom), Screenwriting (nom), Editing (nom)

**READING:** ~Sikov, Film Studies ch 10 & 11, “Genre” and “Special Effects”

**WRITING:** ~Argumentative Paper, Step 3: draft of 2+ pages, including a tentative thesis that concerns both form & theme/meaning, due online by 11 a.m. Wed 4/19

**IN CLASS:** ~Excerpts from “The Alien Agenda: A Filmmaker’s Log” and “Alien Generation: The Visual Effects of District 9” (DVD special features, 44 min)
**Credits**

14th WEEK, APR 26th: CLASS CHOICE AMONG 2017 BEST PICTURE OSCAR NOMINEES

VIEWING: ~TBD (2016) (class will select among options at some point after course’s midpoint)

   ! Best Picture (nom/win?)

READING: ~Sikov, Film Studies ch 12, “Putting It Together: A Model 8- to 10-Page Paper”

WRITING: ~Argumentative Paper, Step 4: at least half-length draft featuring an improved thesis due online by 11 a.m. Wed 4/26

IN CLASS: ~Quiz #4 (covering material since Quiz #3)

   ~Final paper: reverse outlining and other tips

15th WEEK, MAY 3rd: WRITING TIME & INDIVIDUAL/GROUP CONSULTATIONS

WRITING: ~Argumentative Paper, Step 5: full-length draft due online by 11 a.m Wed 5/3

IN CLASS: ~Final paper: individual and group writing consultations, revision help

FINALS WEEK, MAY 10th: PAPER PRESENTATIONS

WRITING: ~Argumentative paper: final version due online (under “Assignments”) by class time

IN CLASS: ~Brief presentations of papers

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**Required Texts**

PLEASE NOTE:

*Prices below are rounded from recent amazon.com new prices—that site has free 2-day shipping for students. In many cases, used copies can be purchased less expensively (also try bookfinder.com).

*I am happy for students to use complete electronic versions of texts so long as they use appropriate citation methods when writing papers and can accept occasional challenges in finding a given passage.


~Lots of movies! How you access these is up to you, and renting/streaming is fine, but it is critical that you watch (and in most cases journal about) each film BEFORE the meeting that focuses on it. A DVD for each film is on library reserve for overnight checkout; in the schedule above, I have also noted availability via DVD/Blu-ray at Rivershare (public) libraries and via several streaming services (Netflix, Amazon, & HBO).
A Few More Recommended Films (*from which you will choose one for the Argumentative Paper*)


Grading Criteria

I will figure final grades using the university scale (A, B, C, D, or F, with pluses/minuses) and the values below (with minor adjustments as needed). Please note the “My Grades” function on the course website, which lets you track assignment grades and estimate your current overall grade at any point.

| 40% | Quizzes (4 x 10% each) |
| 40% | 8 journal entries (10% for each set of 2) |
| 20% | Argumentative paper |

Assignment Descriptions

Quizzes: These will neither be picky, insignificant-detail interrogations, nor such easy affairs that one could prepare sufficiently by reading summaries. The idea is that most people who recently covered all assigned reading and viewing with good comprehension will average 70-80% of the points available (i.e., earn a “B” or better). Please keep in mind that each quiz only covers material since the previous one. Students sometimes worry about the quizzes initially, but generally agree they provide valuable accountability during the course and allow for higher-quality, greater-depth discussions. My best advice is to get the reading and viewing done well in advance, then go back over it, your journals and in-class notes, and my “discussion notes” or other handouts. Checking your understanding and comparing reactions in outside-class conversations with classmates can also be very helpful.

Weekly journal entries: These are spaced across weeks 2-10, and I will grade them in pairs. Each time, I will ask myself how fully your two reflections fulfill the requirements of the individual weeks’ assignments, demonstrate mastery of the formal language of film (as introduced by Sikov and in-class material), and illuminate the greater meaning of the films they discuss. These are journal entries, not formal papers, so I will not evaluate organization, grammar, or mechanics separately, but if your writing is messy, that will impact the insights you can convey. Please also note that each entry provides a word count expectation. Stay within it. That doesn’t mean you can’t draft more at first, but trim the fat so that your writing is as dense with detail as possible. I will be reading your observations next to those of ~24 other students, so it will take some work to see and say something unique.

Argumentative paper: A short (1500+ word, 6+ pp.), carefully revised argument that defends a provocative claim about the relationship between a required film, a recommended film*, and our course questions about money, work, and meaning. While focusing on the film elements that most reward comparison, show awareness of each phase of the filmmaking process, from pre-production (scriptwriting, costumes/sets, location choices) to production (cinematography/mise-en-scène, acting choices) to post-production (editing, sound design/music, SPFX). Please note esp. the intermediate due dates (or “Steps”). The steps are not graded individually, but progress in these stages weighs heavily when a final course grade is on the edge between two possibilities. Students who meet these deadlines receive more feedback, and not surprisingly, they generally write the course’s strongest papers.
My Teaching Philosophy and Expectations of Students

The better we understand each other’s expectations, the more quickly we can develop a good working relationship. Here are a few key elements of my teaching philosophy:

~I want students to engage me and each other authentically and maturely. I hope this course will spark your curiosity in many ways, and that happens best when students honestly and tactfully share reactions to controversial topics. I intentionally raise such issues because a public university classroom is a uniquely valuable setting in which to explore and learn from frank, respectful disagreement. I aim for us to develop a classroom community that everyone appreciates and that extends beyond its walls.

~Just as critically, I expect students to be professionally responsible. You should approach this course as you might a challenging, rewarding job, one with tasks that are yours alone. I well understand that it is very hard to balance multiple classes, paid work, childrearing, and other responsibilities, but my roles include challenging you beyond your comfort zone and honestly assessing your academic work (not your value as a human being). Having a good sense of how your work stacks up, both in terms of strengths and weaknesses, is critical for your future decisions. Do your best to remember: a grade is a snapshot of a brief moment (and even one semester is brief); it takes a lot of these together to begin to illustrate your abilities, and your entire college/grad school GPA will never convey those as fully as the recommendation letters you enable professors to write about you. Those usually matter far more.

~While we will be studying fields in which I am relatively expert, I approach this class as a learner, too. Wisdom is not just knowledge, but humility, a deepening awareness of how much one does not know. I spent over a decade earning my graduate degrees not to hoard power, but to be in a position to empower others. You show you are ready for that with your simultaneous investment. In short, what you get out of this course will be directly related to what you put into it, during and beyond classtime.

Attendance & Participation

My courses differ substantially from those requiring regurgitation of memorized information. Our goals include learning new interpretive approaches, understanding diverse people and ideas, expanding critical thinking and creativity, strengthening analytical and writing skills, and learning from each other’s unique backgrounds. Thus preparation for each session, regular on-time attendance, and thoughtful discussion participation are crucial. Except in extreme circumstances, each class missed beyond 3 (with tardiness or early departure counting as ½ class) will automatically lower the final mark by 1/3 grade (e.g. missing 4 classes changes a B to a B-). Extensive absences will result in an “F” for the course.

Classroom Courtesies

Please excuse yourself when necessary; transitions are the best times. Please mute cell phones and other potential distractions; obviously, laptops and electronics should not be used during in-class quizzes. Finally, please wait to put away materials until we call it a day; I will respect your schedules as well.

Communication

While there are occasional errors, I do my best to build a trustworthy syllabus that won’t need major adjustments. Please read it thoroughly; it answers most routine questions. Also, keep in mind that unless you expect to be gone for multiple class meetings in a row, I don’t need to know about illnesses, transportation problems, work conflicts, or the other ordinary challenges. When you have a question not addressed on the syllabus or in class, please ask after class or in office hours. If that isn’t possible, email is the next best option (far faster than voicemail). My goal is to respond within 2 business days, but if my answer is detailed, I may ask to shift the chat to office hours. Finally, be aware that I sometimes use email to make class announcements, so ensure I have an address you check daily.
Frequently Asked Questions

1. Q. Can I make up the quiz I missed?
   A. Yes—but only within the next week (whether in office hours, during the next class meeting’s break, or immediately afterward). Also, I only offer this opportunity once per semester, barring extreme circumstances (which do not include having to work, car breakdowns, deaths in friends’ families, etc.).

2. Q. Can you tell me what I missed in class?
   A. Not really; the experience of most of our conversations and even my presentations will be difficult to replicate in other forms. However, I can say that almost every week, I hand out some form of “discussion notes,” and I usually post these on the website (under “Content”) soon thereafter, if not beforehand.

3. Q. What should I write about?
   A. What do you care about? What has grabbed you and evoked some sort of emotional response, whether positive, negative, or in some combination? I regularly encourage students to engage texts and questions that have significant personal resonance; most people do their best work when it means more than a grade. If you’re having a hard time getting at what you care about, seek out conversation—not just with me and peers, but also with family, friends, and others who know you well. Sometimes having to introduce your learning to those unfamiliar with the material helps the most in figuring out what excites you.

4. Q. How does your grading scale work?
   A. My system may mean your grade is higher than you think. Western Online will compute your current course grade using my formula, but it’s simple enough to do yourself. The maximum possible points for the course is 100, so divide your total by that (or by the points available as of a given date), then multiply that number by 4. This puts your score on the 4.0 scale, which I then translate to a letter grade. The same process can be used for any individual assignment. So, for example, if you earned 8 out of 10 points on a quiz, you would divide 8 by 10 (=.80), then multiply that by 4 (=3.20), and that would be between a B and a B+. At the course’s conclusion, when consistent effort and other contributions to the class’s success warrant it, I sometimes bump up a borderline grade.

5. Q. Do you want a hard copy of my paper, and when will it be graded?
   A. Please submit papers via the course website only; if it should be inaccessible as a deadline approaches, emailing the paper and then posting it the next day is fine. My goal is to return papers online within a week of the due date. Late papers usually take longer; please alert me of such submissions with an email.

Further Writing Assignment Guidelines

In addition to utilizing the argumentative essay revision guide at the end of this syllabus, it is worth familiarizing yourself with a good style guide. I use MLA style most often, but other styles (Chicago, APA, or another with pre-approval) are fine as long as they are consistently applied. Please use this page setup on all assignments, unless specified otherwise: 1” justified margins on all sides; size 12, Times New Roman font; and double-spacing. Finally, provide a cover page including paper title, course title and my name, your name, and date, as well as a list of works cited or a bibliography. Unless instructed otherwise, all assignments should be submitted online as a docx, doc, or rtf file.

The Writing Center

“The U.S. Bank WIU-QC University Writing Center is available to assist you with general and specific questions on writing assigned in any discipline and at any academic level. The one-on-one assistance available is valuable for generating ideas, talking about global-level issues such as organization, and even working through grammatical problems. The writing center is located in QC Complex 2219. Call 309-762-9481 for an appointment and be sure to bring a copy of your assignment.”
Late Work

Barring extreme emergencies or prior arrangement, I will deduct one-third of a grade for each week (or portion thereof) that an assignment is late. If you anticipate special difficulty in meeting a deadline, please discuss this with me privately and well in advance so that if warranted, we can consider special arrangements. Readings and assignments are in many ways cumulative, so it is important that you keep up; at the same time, we lead busy lives and occasionally other priorities intervene. Balancing those realities, my policy aims to make being on-time important without making a rare delay devastating.

Academic Dishonesty

Plagiarism, cheating, and other forms of academic dishonesty are among the most serious violations of a student’s integrity and of relationships with the instructor, fellow classmates, and the university. In the humanities, plagiarism most often involves presenting another person’s specific words or ideas as one’s own, whether by copying or closely paraphrasing, and without citing the source. Please be aware that such an offense will at minimum result in an “F” on the assignment and in many cases leads to an “F” for the course. In many of my courses, I briefly review proper citation, but if you have questions about how to credit an idea or information source, ask. If you are unsure about definitions or consequences of academic dishonesty, consult WIU’s Student Academic Integrity Policy at http://www.wiu.edu/policies/acintegrity.php.

Counseling Services

“Confidential counseling services are available for WIU-QC students. Time management, stress management, balancing work and family, study skills, low self-esteem, relationship problems, depression, and anxiety are some examples of issues that students may address in personal counseling. Students may call 309/762-1988 to make an appointment with Counseling and Career Services.”

Accommodations

“Students with disabilities: In accordance with University values and disability law, students with disabilities may request academic accommodations where there are aspects of a course that result in barriers to inclusion or accurate assessment of achievement. To file an official request for disability-related accommodations, please contact the Disability Resource Center at 309-298-2512, disability@wiu.edu or in 143 Memorial Hall. Please notify the instructor as soon as possible to ensure that this course is accessible to you in a timely manner.”

Sex Discrimination/Title IX

“University values, Title IX, and other federal and state laws prohibit sex discrimination, including sexual assault/misconduct, dating/domestic violence, and stalking. If you, or someone you know, has been the victim of any of these offenses, we encourage you to report this to the Title IX Coordinator at 309-298-1977 or anonymously online at: http://www.wiu.edu/equal_opportunity_and_access/request_form/index.php. If you disclose an incident to a faculty member, the faculty member must notify the Title IX Coordinator. The complete Title IX policy is available at: http://www.wiu.edu/vpas/policies/titleIX.php.”

Student Rights & Responsibilities

For further information on expectations for both students and university personnel, please see http://www.wiu.edu/provost/students.php.
Dr. Hamner’s Argumentative Essay Revision Checklist

The Introduction

1. **Hook:** Does your introduction (including the first sentence) efficiently grab readers’ attention without being silly, exaggerated, or disconnected? Is the shift from it to the paper’s thesis natural or abrupt?

2. **Thesis:** Is it clear what sentence(s) convey the paper’s central claim?
   - **Strengthening your thesis:**
     - Is your claim obvious or subtle? Boring or daring? Outlandish or plausible?
     - Is your claim vague or specific? General or precise?
     - Is something significant clearly at stake in your argument? Have you provided a sense of why it matters whether your reader buys or dismisses your claim?

3. **Map:** Does the introduction preview the order in which the paper will examine the evidence?

The Body

4. **Main Points:** Can you summarize in a single phrase the main point and/or task of each body paragraph, or are some paragraphs’ goals or relevance to the thesis unclear?

5. **Topic Sentences and Concluding Sentences:** Within a given paragraph, do the topic sentence and concluding sentence fit, without being identical? Do they provide meaningful links between paragraphs?

6. **Organization:** Are there any paragraphs that don’t make logical sense in the organization of the essay—e.g. too-short/disconnected “lonely” paragraphs or too-long/repetitive “bullying” paragraphs? Should any be removed or integrated elsewhere? Can you reorder so the argument’s force grows more naturally?

7. **Textual Evidence/Quotation:** Is there sufficient evidence from specific texts (at least one quotation per body paragraph, as a general rule) to back up the argument’s main points? Are there appropriate page number citations? Does the paper introduce quotations with a sense of their original context? After quotations, do you offer interpretations of their meaning or just expect readers to hear them as you do?

8. **Minimal Summary, Maximum Analysis:** Except in briefly introducing unfamiliar key text(s), does the paper avoid plot summaries? Does your interpretive and analytical work remain the focus?

9. **Reasonable Specifics, Not Generalities or Overreaches:** Does your paper resort to vague generalities that might describe any text? (“The author uses lots of description to help readers understand.”) Does it include gross overstatements that cost you credence? (“In this story everything is about death.”)

The Conclusion

10. **Closure:** Does the conclusion bring the essay to a meaningful close or end abruptly? Does it avoid exact restatement of the introduction, but still reinforce your main points? Does it suggest how the essay’s main ideas might be expanded into other contexts and why it matters that your reader take them seriously?

Mechanics & Style

11. **Grammatical & other mechanical issues:** Has at least one strong writer proofread your paper?
   - **Among the most common problems (beyond spelling, capitalization, basic punctuation):**
     - Pronoun reference: are the referents of your pronouns clear? Do they agree in number?
     - Run-on sentences and fragments: is each of your sentences a single, complete thought?

12. **Stylistic issues:** Have you presented your work in the most professional, attractive manner possible?
   - **Among the most common problems, especially for less experienced writers:**
     - Verbal “fluff”: is every word and phrase doing real work toward demonstrating your thesis? Have you eliminated as much repetition as possible? You want the “impact per word ratio” as high as possible.
     - Have you stayed in the present tense while writing about literature, film, or other artistic texts?
     - Have you provided an accurate, unique, provocative, inviting title?
     - Does your paper fit the length and formatting requirements?