

# ENGLISH 110: COLLEGE WRITING

## Reading Film

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ENGL 110: Fall 2010  
MW, 10:15–12:05, Honors Hall 08  
Office Hours: MW, 12:30–1:30

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**COURSE DESCRIPTION:** Filmmaker Dziga Vertov asks us to think about the intimate relationship between writing and filmmaking: “In the process of shooting and editing [a film], I covered thousands of pieces of paper with my writing, all merely in order to show the truth on the screen.” Likewise, four decades later, filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard declared that “cinema is truth 24 frames per second.” This course will ask you to “write” both films and essays, working as Vertov and Godard did to show “truth” as we focus on ethnographic, observational, educational, and other kinds of documentary film. What we will see is that while “truth” is a noble aspiration for both film and writing, it is as much composed, constructed, and written as it is simply “found” in the world. Thus, in studying and making documentary films, we will pay attention to the different ways “truth” is written: how it is rhetorically positioned, described in language, composed in organizational patterns, supported by evidence or quotation, argued for by persuasive voices, and addressed to particular audiences. In short, we will see how the shared techniques of writing and filmmaking are in fact techniques crucial to evaluating, understanding, and presenting claims about “truth”--and about the world more broadly. To connect this to Queens College’s liberal arts mission, we will focus on our own campus, making connections between film and writing so we can discover and create the “truth” of our college experience.

Students will be loaned a portable digital video camera (Flipcam) for use in the course this semester. Students will be required to sign a rental agreement, to bring the camera to each class, and to use the camera only for ENG 110 class assignments. Students will upload their videos to YouTube and to our class blog. These short films will be paired with writing assignments that ask students to observe their surroundings, persuade others, and research their community. Thus, students should consider filmmaking and writing as two interrelated practices of composition.

English 110 examines the arts and practices of effective writing and reading in college, especially the use of language to discover ideas. Because Queens College believes that the ability to write and communicate effectively is essential to its students’ success both in college and after, this course will introduce students to the components of writing that they will continue to practice during their college career. Students should expect to be challenged and excited by the ambitious goal of taking ownership of language. In general, this means developing fluency with:

- 1) elements of academic writing (such as identifying a thesis, offering analysis, using evidence)
- 2) seeing writing as a process (including pre-drafting, drafting, outlines, editing and revision)
- 3) some rhetorical strategies (such as persuasion, metaphor, comparison and contrast)
- 4) the grammar and mechanics of English (like sentence structure, punctuation, voice)
- 5) considering disciplinary conventions (how different disciplines create different writing)

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**LEARNING OBJECTIVES** for students will include:

- to gain a familiarity with a range of modes of communication, including informal writing, formal academic essays, MLA-style bibliography entries, and letters to peers and professors.
- to develop and use strategies for improving writing and critical thinking through recursive practice, self-reflection, and the process of revision.
- to demonstrate a link between writing and critical thinking by showing how the analysis of ideas is dependent on the ability to communicate them successfully.
- to demonstrate a mastery over basic methods of research and documentation, including how to identify and evaluate appropriate secondary sources for an academic essay, to select quotation for use as evidence, to integrate quotation, and to properly cite quotation using MLA style.
- to identify personal strengths and weaknesses in the process of composition, and to describe methods to achieve future success.

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**ASSIGNMENTS:****Assignment #1: Peer Interview Film (1-2 minutes, done in-class)**

Students will design and film a brief interview of one of their classmates. This will be done in pairs, so that Student A interviews Student B, and vice versa. The aim of this interview is to introduce the classmate to the class, so we will need to establish together a standard interview format. You will not edit this film, so you should plan to shoot one continuous interview.

*Audience:* your classmates, who have not met the subject but will want to know about him or her

**Assignment #2: Transcript and Reflection Essay (posted to blog)**

Compile a transcript of the interview you created for the first film. You should type exactly all of the words that you and your subject said in the film, including any pauses, “ums,” or descriptions of important gestures. Accompanying your complete transcript, write three reflection paragraphs that describe your feelings while being interviewed versus your feelings while doing the interview. Your transcript should be objective, while your reflection should be subjective.

**Assignment #3: Observational Documentary Film (3 minutes)**

For your second film, select an interesting work of public art or architecture located on the campus of Queens College. You should pick something permanent (i.e.--not an art student’s work or a temporary exhibit), but it can be a photograph, sculpture, painting, building, or any other public object. Your task is to make a short “observational documentary,” that describes this work of art. Your job is just to observe and describe the object (and not comment, reflect, or argue about it). You should use editing for this film: in addition to showing the art from different angles, your observation might include showing the context of the artwork, how it “works” if there are moving parts, how it is “used” if it is interactive, and close-ups of any important “parts” that you think should be emphasized. Lastly, since your task is to observe your object without comment or analysis, your film should not use sound--although you can film text or insert intertitles if those are crucial.

*Audience:* A person interested in art but who has never visited the Queens College campus

**Assignment #4: Persuasive Epistolary Essay (4-5 pages)**

After showing your observational documentary about public art on the Queens College campus, you are chagrined to learn that due to state budget cuts your chosen artwork might be destroyed and be replaced by a vending machine or moped parking lot. Your task for this essay is to write a persuasive letter (an “epistolary essay”) to the President of Queens College, persuading him that the work of art you chose deserves to be saved. Your letter should quickly describe the artwork, and then spend time making a persuasive argument that offers three specific reasons for why this artwork deserves to be preserved. You do not need secondary sources; your argument should be based on your own observation. Be sure to include all of the elements of a standard formal letter.

*Audience:* The President of Queens College

**Assignment #5: Community Interview Film (~3 minutes)**

Your letter to the President was a qualified success; he agreed to hold off on destroying the artwork, but he wants to hear more about what role your artwork plays in the Queens College community. Your task now is to prepare and conduct an interview of three different members of the Queens College community. The interviewees might include students, faculty, staff, administrators, or guests, but they should each occupy a different role at the College (so--not just three students). The goal of your interviews is to elicit from your subject his or her feelings about the artwork you have chosen, perhaps including such things as how the interviewees experience the art, what they think the art means or does, and why they like or dislike the art. One of the three interviewees must take a position against the work, so that not all three are just praising it. You will edit these three interviews together to create a short film that shows a sampling of the community’s thoughts about the artwork you chose.

*Audience:* Queens College administrators studying the importance of art on campus

**Assignment #6: Annotated Bibliography (4-5 pages)**

As preparation for a longer film project investigating your chosen art, you will create an annotated bibliography of relevant research. This research might examine the specific history behind your artwork, the larger history of Queens College, particular theories of the value of public art in general or on college campuses in particular, or any other interdisciplinary topic that relates to the context of your artwork. You will use the library’s resources to find five secondary sources that directly relate to your investigation. Using MLA style, create a Works Cited page for these five items. These sources should be scholarly, academic ones such as journal articles, book chapters, or scholarly interviews. Do not use Internet search engines or popular magazines and newspapers. Instead, use a variety of electronic databases like JSTOR, EBSCOHost, and the CUNY+ catalog. Also, one of your five sources must be in print form, such as a book or print journal. Remember before you begin to research to take into consideration the methodology or discipline that you are researching so that you can limit your search to appropriate materials. Since everyone will have picked different art, each student’s research method will be different; for example, you might use a historical approach to research the college’s past as a boys’ reformatory, use sociology to research how urban universities differ from rural campuses, or use economics to discover how public art is paid for and what monetary gain it might provide.

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

*Audience:* An English professor not familiar with the interdisciplinary research you uncover

**Assignment #7: Mock Debate-Interview Transcript (3-4 pp.)**

For this assignment, students will imagine what some of the filmmakers and writers they have studied would say about the role and responsibility that film and other art has in the community. You are going to select two figures we studied this semester to interview for your very own television talk show on the topic “Does Film Tell the Truth?” At least one of these figures should be someone you discovered in your research bibliography. After deciding upon two figures, your task is to prepare the transcript of an imagined, mock debate-interview between them. You should position yourself as the talk-show interviewer between two figures, and do these things: (1) pose a problem or question, (2) elicit responses and dialogue, and (3) analyze and respond to the claims your figures make. You should especially find out how and why these figures might disagree on an issue. It is acceptable to use one or two quotations, but for the most part you will need to imagine what these figures might say to the issues you raise.

*Audience:* A TV audience deciding whether or not film can have an impact on the community

**Assignment #8: “Kino-Pravda” Film Essay (7-9 minutes)**

Thinking back to Dziga Vertov’s practice of kino-pravda or “Film Truth,” your final film project is to make a documentary film essay that synthesizes all of your research and thinking about how your chosen artwork functions in the community, making an argument about the significance of this art. Your film essay might include such things as: a discussion of the history of work, its cultural significance, a technical description of how it works or how it was made, an aesthetic description of its qualities, a cultural description of how it is perceived. You should incorporate your early footage from the “Observational Documentary” and the “Community Interview,” but also add about 5 minutes of contextual and argumentative information described above.

*Audience:* The Queens College community

**Assignment #9: Film Festival Program Notes (4-5 pages)**

After showing your Film Essay to the Queens College community, there has been enough interest that it has been selected to headline a film festival devoted to community issues in Queens College. Your last task is to write the program notes for your film essay. These program notes should contextualize the work, and offer a reading or analysis of the film.

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**READINGS:** All required course readings are password-protected on [readingfilm.qwriting.org](http://readingfilm.qwriting.org). Students are expected to make use of the Library's electronic and print resources. For additional help with mechanics, grammar, and MLA style, students are directed to the Queens College Writing Center at <http://qcpages.qc.edu/qcsw/> and to Purdue's "OWL."

**PARTICIPATION:** This is a linked course, so the themes and discussions in this course intersect with and compliment the issues in your Media Studies class. If you drop this course, you must also drop MDST 144. Since participation is crucial to your success, you must not miss more than three classes. I do not differentiate between excused and unexcused absences. Please do not arrive late, leave before class ends, or leave in the middle of class. If you come unprepared, you are absent; this includes such things as not doing the reading, not bringing the text to class, sleeping during class, or not making an effort to participate. If you know you cannot attend, contact me *before* to inquire about turning in homework; I do not accept late assignments.

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**GRADING:** Assignments are sequenced to stress the recursive practice of writing. Students will revise their writing for a portfolio that is assessed for a final grade, introduced by a **Cover Letter** that explains the process gone through to create a portfolio, the strengths gained by producing these writings, and challenges still faced as writers. Students are evaluated in three broad areas:

- 1) their ability and diligence in completing all writing assignments on time, reading and reflecting on assigned readings before class, and participating in class and blog discussions.
- 2) their competence in meeting the learning objectives identified above.
- 3) their ability to demonstrate, through the pieces in their final portfolio and their meta-reflective cover letter, that they have made thoughtful and careful revision from earlier drafts.

In practice, the final grade will be a "negotiation." Students should meet with me one-on-one during the final third of the semester, where we will discuss current strengths and weaknesses and establish expectations for the remainder of the semester. We will agree on an appropriate final grade, dependent upon completing a list of expectations. This list might include specific revision of certain assignments, good faith effort to participate more, or mastery of recurring problem areas. Students will submit a memo outlining our meeting to serve as a grading contract.

**ACADEMIC INTEGRITY:** In 2004, the Board of Trustees adopted a new *CUNY Policy on Academic Integrity*. Violations include: cheating, fabrication, facilitating academic dishonesty, plagiarism, and denying others access to information. It is your responsibility to be aware of what constitutes academic dishonesty; students who are unsure of whether their work meets criteria for academic integrity should consult with their instructor. Please look at the full policy, which provides further examples and possible consequences for incidences of academic dishonesty: <http://web.cuny.edu/academics/info-central/policies/academic-integrity.pdf>

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**I have a zero-tolerance policy towards plagiarism and academic dishonesty. The *minimum* punishment for any plagiarism in this course is receiving an F as a final grade and being reported to the Vice President for Student Affairs.**

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If you have a learning, sensory, or physical reason for special accommodation in this class, contact the Office of Special Services in 171 Kiely Hall at 718-997-5870 and please inform me.

## COURSE CALENDAR

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| <b>8/30:</b>  | Course Introduction   |
| <b>9/1:</b>   | <i>In-class:</i> Intro to WMM and YouTube; Draft and shoot “Peer Interview Film”<br><i>Due:</i> Sign up for QWriting account, Sign up for YouTube account, Join the blog and introduce yourself           |
| <b>9/6:</b>   | <b>NO CLASS (Labor Day)</b>   |
| <b>9/8:</b>   | Read Levin interview with Frederick Wiseman<br><i>Due:</i> Peer Interview Film (link to YouTube using “Peer Interview” category)  |
| <b>9/13:</b>  | Read Eisenstein, “The Cinematographic Principle,” first half<br><i>Due:</i> Transcript and Reflection Essay (use “Interview Transcript” category)   |
| <b>9/15:</b>  | Read Eisenstein, “The Cinematographic Principle,” second half<br><i>Due:</i> Post one picture of a piece of public art on campus (use “Filming Locations” category); Comment on 2 other posts by Saturday |
| <b>9/20:</b>  | Read Bazin, “Adaptation, or the Cinema as Digest”   |
| <b>9/22:</b>  | Read Barthes, “The Romans in Films”<br><i>Post to blog 3 ¶s on Barthes “ethics”; Comment on 2 other posts by Saturday</i>   |
| <b>9/27:</b>  | Read Eisenstein, “The Montage of Film Attractions”  |
| <b>9/29:</b>  | *** Read Grierson, “First Principles of Documentary”<br><i>Post to blog a 3 ¶ response to Grierson; Comment on 2 other entries by Saturday</i>  |
| <b>10/4:</b>  | Read Gordon Harvey’s “Elements of the Academic Essay”<br>*** Work on Observational Documentary  |
| <b>10/6:</b>  | *** Library Visit<br><i>Due:</i> Post link to Observational Documentary by midnight (use “Documentary” category); Comment on 2 other documentaries by Saturday  |
| <b>10/11:</b> | <b>NO CLASS (Columbus Day)</b>  |
| <b>10/13:</b> | Read Sherman, “Projecting the Self” first half<br><i>Due:</i> Persuasive Epistolary Essay   |
| <b>10/18:</b> | Read Sherman, “Projecting the Self” second half<br><i>Post 3¶ response on how Sherman does or doesn’t use Harvey’s “Elements”</i>   |

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| <b>10/20:</b>    | Read Arnheim, "Who is the Author of a Film"<br><i>Due: Community Interview Film (use "Community Interview" category)</i>   |
| <b>10/25:</b>    | Read about MLA style on Purdue's "OWL" website: <a href="http://owl.english.purdue.edu/">http://owl.english.purdue.edu/</a><br><i>Respond to 2 of the Community Interview Films by today's class</i> |
| <b>10/27:</b>    | Read select reviews from MRQE (see blog) and Sontag's "Decay of Cinema"  |
| <b>11/1:</b>     | Read Woolf, "The Movies and Reality"<br><i>Due: Annotated Bibliography</i>   |
| <b>11/3:</b>     | <b>NO CLASS</b>  |
| <b>11/8:</b>     | Read Balázs, "The Creative Camera"   |
| <b>11/10:</b>    | Read Vertov, "WE" and "the Fifth Issue"<br><i>Due: Mock Debate-Interview Transcript</i>  |
| <b>11/15:</b>    | Read Vertov, "Kinoks"<br><i>Post to blog a 3 ¶ response to Vertov; Comment on 2 other entries by Wednesday</i>   |
| <b>11/17:</b>    | Read Vertov, "Kinoks-Revolution, Selections"   |
| <b>11/22:</b>    | Read William Zinsser, "Simplicity" and "Simplicity (Draft)"<br><i>Peer Workshop on portfolio pieces</i>  |
| <b>11/24:</b>    | Read Walter Murch, "Cut Out the Bad Bits" and "Why Do Cuts Work?"<br><i>Due: Kino-Pravda Film Essay (use "Kino-Pravda" category)</i>   |
| <b>11/29:</b>    | Discuss Kino-Pravdas<br><i>Respond to 3 of the Kino-Pravda's by today's class.</i>   |
| <b>12/1:</b>     | Peer Workshop on portfolio pieces  |
| <b>12/6:</b>     | Peer Workshop on portfolio pieces  |
| <b>12/8:</b>     | Read Wild, "Writing Images"<br><i>Due: Program Notes (put under your Kino-Pravda post)</i>   |
| <b>12/13:</b>    | Last day of class. <i>Respond to 2 Program Notes by class</i><br><i>Due: Cover Letter</i>  |
| <b>Final tba</b> | <i>Final Portfolio due before or during final exam period.</i>   |