



Lesson Title: Film Criticism: Understanding Sound Arguments of Judgment

Burning Question: How can I get students to **understand sound arguments** by comparing published reviews of film, television or theatrical performances and identifying judgments **that provide evidence and warrants** (explanations or elaborations) to back up the reviewers' claims?

Objectives: In *Teaching Argument Writing* (pp. 103-113), George Hillocks states that "...students need to understand what makes an argument sound. And to do that, it is necessary to understand the nature of judgments and their warrants and backing." By comparing published reviews of a film students have seen, they can begin to look further into the art of filmmaking as well as learn what elements of a film top critics may use evaluate to develop their argument.

Context: This assignment was developed as a way of getting students to understand the basis of reviewers' judgments as a way of further deepening their own judgments of films beyond "I liked it or I didn't like it." This is the initial assignment of a film unit or course, but could be used in any English class. It helps students begin to develop critical viewing skills by analyzing professional criticism. The follow-up comparison essay is designed to help students argue their own opinion of a film in addition to analyzing published reviews of the same film.

Materials: Published reviews appear in major newspapers or magazines (Salt Lake Tribune, Chicago Sun Times, The New York Times, Newsweek Magazine, San Francisco Chronicle, to name a few) as well as media sources such as NPR.org. Additionally, students can access reviews of a particular movie on-line at www.rottentomatoes.com by typing in the name of the film and then searching for Top Critics.

Time Span: Variable, but generally one day for introduction and small group work and then another few days (depending on class length and meeting times) for students to complete and present their individual chart of findings.

Vocabulary: genre (fantasy-adventure, comic-book superhero, romantic comedy, drama), claim, evidence, warrant

Procedure:

- 1) Begin by asking students to name some favorite films. After hearing oral responses, have students write the names on the board—or the teacher can write them up. It works well to ask them to name some of their favorite childhood films and begin there.
- 2) Next ask them to state why one of the films they named is a favorite. As students give reasons, write them down. Be prepared for students to disagree and help them understand immediately that people often have very different opinions about the same films.

- 3) Have them look at the reasons they gave. Were they impressed with the story, the camera work (cinematography), special effects, acting, directing, pacing or something else? Explain that these are some of the aspects of film that professional critics look at in order to form an opinion.
- 4) Hand out or project on a screen one review. A review of Pixar's *Ratatouille* (2007) may be printed out from www.rottentomatoes.org. Read it aloud or ask students to read it silently.
- 5) Work with the class to identify the critic's argument. Record their comments on a three-column chart (claim, evidence, warrant)

Claim (Explanation)	Evidence—quotes from article	Warrant
One of the year's best character) Films animated, but he	"Triumph of animation, comedy, imagination and, yes, humanity."	Remy (main may be has physical expressiveness

- 6) Place students in groups of three or four and hand each group another review of the same film. Ask them to then discuss the review by filling out the same chart based on their group's review. A class discussion about differences in critic's opinions of the same film could follow.
- 7) Assign students to find and print two published reviews of another film, one **they have seen**, and bring the copies to class on an assigned date. Tell them to read the reviews before attending class and be able to discuss each reviewer's opinion (claim) and evidence for that opinion.
- 8) On the assigned day, each student can briefly present his or her findings. Ask each to name their film and identify their reviewers. Then ask students to briefly state each critic's opinion. Additionally, students could be assigned to create a chart for each of their reviews. This could be completed as homework. They will also need to create a chart of their own opinion of the film.

Extensions:

This assignment could also be done with television, theater, music, book, concert, or video game reviews.

Follow-up Essay:

Assign an essay of comparison where the students compare/contrast the two reviewer's opinions with their personal opinion. Within their essays students should be able to incorporate the language of argument: Claim, Evidence, and Warrant in order to reach a judgment about the soundness of each reviewer's argument. In addition, the student begins to articulate their own opinion of a film.

Rationale: *Common Core Standards*

RI. 9-12. 1, 2, 3; S.L. 9-12. 1.a-d. 3.

Rationale for the Extended Comparison Essay: *Common Core Standards*

WS. 9-12. 1.a-d.

Resources:

Hillocks, George. *Teaching Argument Writing*. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2011.

Various published reviews.