

USING FILM

TO UNLOCK TEXTUAL LITERACY

A TEACHER'S GUIDE



ROBERT BRYANT CRISP

...for the cause, my soul,— Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars!— It is the cause. Yet I'll not shun
...hood; Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow, And smooth as monumental alabaster. Yet she must die, el
...berry night, and she shall see the light: If I quench thee, thou flaming minister, I can
...thy former light restore, Should I repent me: but once put out thy light, Thou cunning'st pattern of excellin
...I know not where is that Promethean heat That can thy light relume. When I have pluck'd the rose, I can
...vital growth again. It must needs wither: I'll smell it on the tree. Kissing her Ah balmy breath, that dost almo
...justice to break her sword! One more, one more. Be thus when thou art dead, and I will kill thee. And I

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Introduction to the Course

This distinction between form and experience is not pedantic, but fundamental: a form can express the Transcendent, an experience cannot. A form can express the common ground in which all things share. An experience can only express one man's reaction to that common ground.

—PAUL SCHRADER, *Transcendental Style in Film: Ozu, Bresson, Dreyer*

When we talk about meeting kids where they are, we have to mean it. Film, after all, is ubiquitous. We are surrounded by screens—television, film, cell phones, ads on the sides of buildings, even fast-food menus. We are inundated with shows, games, and advertisements. As a result, we understand film viscerally, if not intellectually. It is a language we can comprehend and from which we can make meaning, even when we may not understand the technical aspects of how that process happens.

So, if that is the case, we as educators should take advantage of that fact. Reach kids where they are, right? The problem is that most of us learned to teach print texts in college, not films. Only relatively recently have large numbers of English teachers begun to see film as a viable form of nonprint text. The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), recognizing the value of such texts, has published quite a few books and articles on the subject.

The simple fact is that telling stories via the medium of film requires every bit of the forethought and intent that constructing print text requires. Technical considerations are inherent in the medium, of course, but at its core, the process is the same. Want the audience to relate? Develop the characters. Want to hook your reader/viewer? Build suspense. Develop a conflict. Insert complicating actions. And given the degree of intent required, it stands to reason that film can therefore be read in much the same way as print text can be read.

The difficulty with reading film texts stems from the lack of specific training many English teachers received in college. The interesting fact about reading film, though, is that the medium allows for a visceral experience that print text cannot. We understand the tension, we feel the suspense, and we understand the characters, all without the advantage of technical expertise. Film is designed to be felt—we just don't always understand the *how* of it all.

The difficulty with reading print texts is of a different type entirely. English teachers become English teachers for a variety of reasons, but the common thread is that we are all good readers. We see the characters in our mind's eye. We hear their voices. The worlds they inhabit become real for us. And when the texts we read are made into film, we often complain that the characters do not *look* right, do not *sound* right, and *that just isn't how that place is supposed to look*. We take for granted that not all of our students come to class with this same skill set, so we spend a tremendous amount of time attempting to overcome this deficit. Film study can be a fantastic way to bridge that gap.

For instance, film study can be a wonderful way to teach our students how to use their imaginations. My seventh grader mentioned to me the other day that she was glad she got to see the film version of a book she had read because, "Now I get to see what they look like!" But for film to be effective as a teaching tool, we should take the opposite approach. For example, give students a text and have them plan it out first, and then compare to a film version. Or compare multiple film versions of a given scene to see how different directors envision the story. The important takeaway is that a film represents one director's vision, which is a very different thing from saying it represents "The Truth." By extension, then, every person—every student—is entitled to their own vision as well.

Once students are able to internalize that their perspective is valid, they learn to trust it. Then they learn to develop it. Finally, when they go back to that print text, they have an entirely different experience. They "see" the world of the story. They can "hear" the characters' voices. And they begin to interact with the text in a whole new way. Why did that happen? Why couldn't this happen? They begin to evaluate, to analyze, and to consider options. And isn't that what we want?

Moreover, one of the major goals of teachers of literature is to lead students through a close reading of the text in order to identify the techniques a writer uses in order to make meaning. Once identified, those techniques are analyzed in terms of their effectiveness. Ultimately, as students begin to identify the *how* and *why* regarding the techniques good writers use, the thinking is those students will be more likely to be able to incorporate those techniques into their own writing, thereby becoming better writers.

With regard to film, the goals of the storyteller are the same. Convey a set-

ting. Craft relatable characters. Weave an engaging conflict. Build toward a resolution. All this while connecting with the reader and guiding that reader's emotions. The difference when studying film is that the filmmaker has many more tools with which to accomplish these goals.

When examining print texts, instructors generally pose similar questions. Why did the author use this word instead of that one? How does the author develop given characters? How does the author's sentence construction build suspense? We study characters, conflicts, mood, tone, connotation, denotation, sentence structure, plot structure, irony, foreshadowing, voice, intent, diction, the effect of audience on style and message, and many other literary elements.

When examining film texts, instructors can pose the same questions. The difference, though, is there are now many more elements to consider. Why, for instance, would the filmmaker begin the scene with shots of a second-floor inner-city classroom? Why would the filmmaker film this character from a high angle? Why would the filmmaker use side lighting for that character? What does the filmmaker's use of a trombone shot on this character convey about what the character is thinking or feeling?

At the end of the day, whether one studies print text or film, the goal is still to break down how storytellers tell their stories. The flip side to that coin is to use that knowledge to the benefit of our own writing. Learn to receive; learn to create.

This book is designed to help you teach film in your classroom to equip your students with the skills they could then apply to the creation of their own films. The underlying philosophy is that by engaging students in a familiar medium, by teaching them the tools storytellers utilize to make their audiences feel, engage, and relate, students can develop a skill set that will help print texts come alive for them in ways it never has before.

And if your students have fun along the way? Even better!

You may have never been trained to teach film, but the important idea to understand is that you can do this even without such specialized training. The lessons in this book are designed to equip you with the skills and knowledge necessary to teach film effectively in your classroom with your existing skill set. To that end, you will find lesson plans (in the Sample Lessons section), a glossary of film terms (Appendix A and in lists specific to each unit lesson); comparison and observation charts and rubrics (Appendix B), assessments (Appendix C), storyboard templates (Appendix D), Common Core State Standards addressed in each unit lesson (see Appendix E for the complete list), and more generally, step-by-step instructions designed to make planning and implementation easier for you. Try a lesson and see how your students respond!

Developing Effective Course Objectives

Success involves failing first. Ask any successful person. Ask any experienced person, really. It's all part of the creative process, so sit back and allow the artist within you to sprout, blossom and flourish. You must accept that your first, second, and third attempt at something might suck. It's a necessary step in improving your skill. Failure is your teacher, not your judge.

—CONNOR FRANTA, *A Work in Progress*

In general, your objectives when teaching film mirror those when you are teaching print text. You want your students to examine how a particular author utilizes a particular technique in a particular text to make meaning. No sense in reinventing the wheel—keep that basic template, but sub in directors for authors, film titles for print titles, etc. For example, the following are a few sample objectives (or objective stems) covered in this course:

- We will examine [a scene/scenes] from [text title] to determine how [director] uses [film technique] in order to impact meaning and influence audience perception.
- We will examine [a scene/scenes] from [text title/titles] to determine basic elements of [director's] voice/style.
- We will examine [a scene/scenes] from [text title/titles] to determine basic elements of [given film movement].
- We will examine how [director] uses [film techniques] to make meaning and use our understanding of this director's approach to craft our own scenes in this director's style.

The important thing to notice in this case is how closely these objectives mirror those one might find adorning the board in a more traditional English classroom. We will examine Robert Service's poem "My Prisoner" in order to determine how he uses dialect and nonstandard spelling in order (just kidding about the "in order" part!) to impact meaning and influence audience perspective. After all, when teaching reading, the English teacher's goal can generally be simplified to helping students learn to see and evaluate the techniques authors use to make meaning or influence an audience.

For instance, take a look at the first objective listed above:

TEMPLATE: We will examine [a scene/scenes] from [text title] to determine

how [director] uses [film technique] to impact meaning and influence audience perception.

VERSION 1: We will examine the poem “next to of course god america i” to determine how E. E. Cummings uses capitalization, enjambment, and sarcasm to impact meaning and influence audience perception.

VERSION 2: We will examine the shower scene from *Psycho* to determine how Hitchcock uses montage, point-of-view shots, and pacing to impact meaning and influence audience response.

In short, contrary to what you might expect, this book does not ask you to stray far from how you were taught to teach. We will still teach our students how to break down challenging texts, identify the storytelling techniques we discover, and use those techniques to craft our own new stories. What this book does ask you to do is to use a form of text with which your students are familiar to positively impact their understanding of the craft of storytelling, thereby building student literacy.

For your convenience, more specific objectives are listed at the beginning of each unit.

Different Skills Pay Different Bills: A Note Regarding Differentiation

Science Technology Engineering and Math is still necessary to know if you dream of being a filmmaker. Filmmaking is an art form, but with the use of STEM.

—KAILIN GOW

We all look for the best way to reach our kids, and we have heard the old admonition that we should “reach kids where they are” a thousand times. *Differentiate. Check.* We also know that doing so in a class of thirty-five or more kids is challenging, to say the least. How, then, does one differentiate in a film class?

Film is an incredibly rich, fantastically thorough collaboration of a wide variety of people with a wide variety of skills and talents. Each person is important; each role on a film set is invaluable. The overall project would not work if any one of those roles were not filled.

To that end, we begin by exploring those different roles. We write treatments. We write scripts. We scout locations. We storyboard. We do basic filming and editing. And as we fill these different roles, we gain a more thorough under-

standing of the process and a better understanding of our own strengths and weaknesses. As that process unfolds, we gravitate toward the roles that most interest us. In the end, students gravitate toward cinematography, or editing, or writing, or directing, etc.—each of whom plays a different “instrument,” so to speak, in the orchestra that is the filmmaking process.

As the teacher, you then may take advantage of what students have learned about themselves. For example, you may assign students a text as homework, and students may then choose whether they wish to complete storyboards, prepare a treatment, write interior monologues for the characters, or design the set. Each job is important, and the overall project needs them all. Not every poet, for example, must be a master of rhyme.

This understanding is important as well when teaching students to manage collaborative groups. Students should recognize they will need each skill set to be represented in each group. Every film project will need a producer. Every film project will require a director. A cinematographer. A writer. An editor. The skill sets these people bring to the table are very different, and none of those jobs is expendable.

In that sense, a film class is the very model of what a differentiated classroom should look like. Every student is working toward the same goal—a completed film—but each is working in a way that best fits that student’s skill set.

For your benefit, each unit is preceded by materials that include ideas for differentiating within each lesson.

It Takes a Village: Film Set Hierarchy

Make films that purify the soul with the flow of rational, vigorous and compassionate thinking.

—ABHIJIT NASKAR, *The Film Testament*

There are hundreds of jobs on a film set, and every one of them adds in some important way to the finished product. There are thousands of personal, logistical, and artistic considerations, and every one of these decisions falls under the jurisdiction of one of those jobs. For the sake of simplicity, though, in a classroom context, these jobs will need to be condensed quite a bit. Additionally, some responsibilities may be reassigned for the sake of balancing the workload.

To that end, I am a firm believer that every person in a group should have a specific set of responsibilities. In this way, students understand how they contribute to the group’s overall success. As important, they understand that if they

do not fulfill their responsibilities, the project will not be successful. The types of assignments in this class, after all, do not allow for the “You do the odd questions, and I’ll do the even ones” approach.

Consequently, students need to know exactly what roles they will be expected to fill. In virtually every collaborative assignment in this book, the following roles should suffice.

Producer

The producer oversees all of the logistics, which include correspondence with the actors and crew as well as supervising the shooting schedule and securing locations for filming. The producer brings aboard the actors for the film (which may include auditions) and makes sure every group member knows when they are needed for filming (call sheets). In a condensed classroom setting, the producer may also need to do location scouting to find an appropriate place for the group to film. In short, the producer is responsible for making sure the director has everything they need in order to complete the project. It should be noted that the responsibilities delineated here actually go beyond the scope of what a Hollywood producer would be required to do. Those additional responsibilities have been rolled into the producer’s job description simply as a way to help balance the workload among group members.

Director

The director is the person with the creative vision for the film in general. The director must make sure everyone knows their responsibilities and that they will be able to fulfill those responsibilities. Further, the director will set the due dates for each phase of the process. The director is responsible for working closely with the actors to determine how they should perform their roles. Additionally, the director is responsible for crafting a treatment for the scriptwriter (an added role intended to help balance group responsibilities) and then using the subsequent script to develop the storyboards.

Scriptwriter/Supervisor

Some of the following roles have been expanded beyond what one might expect to see in Hollywood for the sake of balancing group members’ workloads. We begin with the scriptwriter. The scriptwriter is responsible for writing the script. Once the director has completed the treatment for the film, the scriptwriter uses

the treatment to craft a script. The script is the blueprint for the whole project, so it should satisfy all the key players' core visions of what's being produced. Having said that, the scriptwriter may need to complete several drafts of the script before the script can be used. Once the script is ready, the scriptwriter hands the script off to the director so the director can complete the storyboarding process. The scriptwriter also must ensure all participants have the up-to-date version of whatever scene is being filmed at the time. In summary, the scriptwriter will need to be in regular, close contact with the director so as to be sure they create a good, feasible product.

Director of Photography

The director of photography, or DP, is responsible for capturing the director's creative vision on film. The DP will use the storyboards as a guide for filming the necessary shots. To that end, the director of photography will need to have access to the necessary film equipment and will need to have a clear understanding of how to use the camera to capture the director's artistic vision. When finished filming, the DP will need to organize all of the footage for the editor to quickly access the desired shots and takes. This process will involve renaming the video files based on scene, take, etc., so the editor can access the files with maximum efficiency.

Cinematographer

The cinematographer is responsible for capturing the director's artistic vision, using the storyboards as a primary guide. The cinematographer will need to be knowledgeable in the application of the Rule of Thirds, the 180-Degree Rule, and the Golden Ratio. The cinematographer will need to be knowledgeable in the maintenance and operation of the camera, and must be able to be present whenever filming is to take place.

Editor

Films are told twice, it is said—once in front to the camera and again during the editing process. The editor is responsible for culling all of the footage for the best shots and putting them together to create a clean, cohesive whole. Good editing helps create a tempo for the story, moving the action along without either dragging it out or moving too quickly. A good editor must be able to identify what is necessary and be willing to cut what is not. An editor should be able to use the

film the cinematographers give them to create a polished, professional-looking finished product. The editor will need to work closely with the director at this stage of the project.

Actors

These people will be responsible for filling the requisite character roles. If an actor is part of the class, then the actor must also participate in one of the other production capacities outlined above. Actors may be brought in from outside, however. Groups should cast appropriately, meaning that if a group needs a grandpa, that group should cast someone of the appropriate age, or if a character is a mom, the actor should be of an appropriate age as well. This is a great opportunity to work with students in the drama department as well as other talented actors. Bad casting can quickly kill the realism of a scene and pull the viewer out of the moment.

Connecting Classroom Learning to the Real World: Small-Group Project List

When I looked at life through the camera, I felt like I could finally see it.

—KATHERINE HOWE, *The Appearance of Annie Van Sinderen*

One cannot truly understand film without participating in some way to make film. To suggest otherwise would be to suggest one could learn to drive without ever getting behind the wheel of a vehicle or that one could understand fishing without ever baiting a hook or casting a line. Such suggestions are inherently foolish.

That said, when it comes to filmmaking, there are quite a few options available to you to try with your students. The following are examples of the types of projects you may want to explore. Some work well for group projects while others work well as extra credit assignments. How you choose to use them is, of course, up to you.

Generally speaking, I assign one of these projects per quarter, and students work on them concurrently with whatever we are doing in class. Depending upon your students' access to and familiarity with the requisite technology, you may wish to adjust the number of projects you assign to suit your situation.

OPTION 1: FILM TRAILER OF MY LIFE

ASSIGNMENT: If someone were to make a film about your life, what would the trailer look like? Create a one-minute film trailer for that film.

RATIONALE: Trailers (or previews) are obviously an important part of the film-making process. In this case, the challenge is to tell the story in a much more concise format.

REQUIRED ELEMENTS: This trailer should include the title of the film, your name as the star, a soundtrack, and clips from scenes that would be included in your film. The trailer should be one minute long.

NOTE: This assignment can be done with relatively little difficulty on a cell phone, and it makes a great introductory assignment. Students get to experience basic video editing, and you wind up with a finished product that helps you learn names and faces.

OPTION 2: MUSIC VIDEO

ASSIGNMENT: Create a music video for a song that tells a story. Lyrics must be approved by the teacher and may not reference alcohol, drugs/drug use, or suicide.

RATIONALE: The story is already there—all that is left is to add the visual component. In theory, this assignment should be relatively easy because it is relatively short, and there is no need to write an original story. As a side note, alternate interpretations of the lyrics are acceptable.

REQUIRED ELEMENTS: The music video requires an understanding of the source text—in this case, a song—and the ability to convey that understanding via basic film techniques. As an option, if you are a musician, feel free to use your own original song.

NOTE: This project is quite a bit more intensive than the introductory film trailer. Students are interpreting lyrics, managing a team of actors, and learning to edit longer sequences. This project is generally the first big project I assign.

OPTION 3: MASHED-UP MOVIE TRAILER

ASSIGNMENT: Use video from one film and audio from another to make a misleading movie trailer—for example, a children’s cartoon using a war film’s audio track.

RATIONALE: This assignment helps students begin to take ownership of the process, which is key to telling original stories. Additionally, this project, perhaps more than any of the others, enables students to understand the importance of context as well as just how much power storytellers have to guide their audiences.

REQUIRED ELEMENTS: A “mash-up” is where one takes video clips from one film and sound from another to make a thirty-second movie trailer (think *Bambi* meets *300*). Cartoons work well for video clips, given that the mouths of the characters often do not match up exactly to their spoken words. A quick YouTube search will turn up some good examples.

NOTE: I usually offer this project as an extra credit project, though it could certainly work as a standard one. Be aware the difficulty level is deceptive. Though the finished product will be short (I generally set a time length, whether 1:00, 1:30, or as much as 2:00), students must cull both footage and audio, a process that can be labor intensive.

OPTION 4: SILENT FILM

ASSIGNMENT: Create an updated silent film. The story may be original, or it may be based on a published piece. The story must be approved by the teacher and may not reference alcohol, drugs/drug use, or suicide.

RATIONALE: Dialogue is a bit of a filmmaker’s crutch. This assignment forces a reliance on the visual aspect of storytelling.

REQUIRED ELEMENTS: The silent film need not be completely silent; rather, it simply cannot include spoken words. There should, in fact, be sound, and both diegetic and nondiegetic sound is acceptable.

NOTE: This project is the second large project I typically assign. The music video was relatively easy in the sense that the lyrics help drive the action. In the silent film, however, the story must be told in other ways. One cannot rely on dialogue but instead must use the various techniques we have covered in order to tell the story.

OPTION 5: GENRE-BENDER MOVIE TRAILER

ASSIGNMENT: Make a “genre-bender” movie trailer.

RATIONALE: This project is a fun way to reinterpret film footage.

REQUIRED ELEMENTS: In this type of trailer, one takes a film, uses clips out of context, and, perhaps with the benefit of a voice-over, presents the film as belonging to a completely different genre. Think *The Shining* presented as a romantic comedy or *Edward Scissorhands* as a horror film.

NOTE: This is another project I typically offer as an extra credit assignment, though again, this project could stand alone. The idea is similar to the movie trailer mash-up assignment. The difference—and this is important—is that the audio and video must come from the same film. In short, one must take clips from a given film out of context.

OPTION OPTION 6: FILM REVIEW

ASSIGNMENT: You may go to see a new movie (must be within two weeks of its release), write a review (minimum of 500 words), and present your review to the class. Your score will be based on how thorough I feel you have been and how helpful I believe the review to be.

RATIONALE: This assignment is a great way to assess your thinking with regard to the films you have been studying. Are you beginning to understand how the elements work together to form a coherent whole? Can you evaluate the effectiveness of those techniques? Moreover, this assignment provides you with an excellent opportunity for authentic research, given that you will want to look into other films by that director, other performances by the actors, etc.

REQUIRED ELEMENTS: The review should be typed and at least 500 words long.

NOTE: This assignment works well as both a summative and a formative assessment. After all, having students put their thoughts in writing helps them organize those thoughts and enables the teacher to determine how well students understand what they have been studying. Based on the results, the teacher may then adjust instruction accordingly.

OPTION 7: TEN-MINUTE FILM PROPOSAL/PREPRODUCTION NOTEBOOK

ASSIGNMENT: Submit a proposal for a possible ten-minute film. The story must be approved by the teacher and may not reference alcohol, drugs/drug use, or suicide.

RATIONALE: This assignment represents the preproduction phase of the film-making process. Far from busywork, this assignment reflects the real-world process of making film.

REQUIRED ELEMENTS: This project will be presented in a three-ring binder and must include a 1,000-word treatment, a script, 50 storyboards (including shot list), shooting locations (including photographs of these locations), costumes (photographs and rationales), interior monologues (500 words each), a shooting schedule, and credits. As an alternative, the entire project may be done on a digital platform just as easily, depending on personal preference.

NOTE: I usually assign this as the third of four group projects. For longer film projects to turn out well, they must be planned well. Poor planning leads to poor filmmaking.

OPTION 8: FOLEY SOUND PROJECT

ASSIGNMENT: Given sample visual text, create the Foley sounds and add them to the video.

RATIONALE: Sound is massively important in film, and much of that sound is created in Foley studios. This project is designed to help you better understand the Foley process.

REQUIRED ELEMENTS: You will be provided a short film clip. After determining what sounds will be needed, film groups must create/re-create those sounds and add them to the video. Additionally, you must provide a video of the process you went through to add the sounds.

NOTE: The idea, of course, is to create, or re-create, the sounds produced in a short video clip. This assignment can be especially challenging when the sounds produced on-screen do not typically occur in nature. For example, no one knows how removing the lid of the Ark of the Covenant sounds. No worries! In Raiders of the Lost Ark, Steven Spielberg used the porcelain lid of the water reservoir on the back of a toilet to get that heavy grinding effect!

OPTION 9: SHORT DOCUMENTARY

ASSIGNMENT: Create a short documentary that addresses a topic of your choosing. The topic must be approved by the teacher.

RATIONALE: This assignment allows you to both address a topic that interests you and use the techniques we have covered thus far in the class regarding film techniques and how to impact audience perspective.

REQUIRED ELEMENTS: Documentaries are constructed in a specific way with specific components. Documentaries tend to include interviews, cutaways, cinéma vérité or live footage, process footage, and archival footage. The project will be assessed on the basis of the variety, effectiveness, and originality of the techniques you employed.

NOTE: This assignment gives students the opportunity to address topics that are important to them and, as a result, can be a rewarding experience. You will want to provide a time limit, of course; five to ten minutes should work nicely.

OPTION 10: TEN-MINUTE FILM

ASSIGNMENT: Create a ten-minute film (give or take thirty seconds) based on a previously published work (e.g., a song, short story, essay, novel, chapter from a novel, etc.). The story must be approved by the teacher and may not reference alcohol, drugs/drug use, or suicide.

RATIONALE: This assignment is the culmination of the class and represents an opportunity to explore the techniques covered in class to their full potential. Selected films may be eligible for entry into the film festival.

REQUIRED ELEMENTS: Genre and style are completely open. The ten-minute film may be stop-motion animation/photography, 2D animation, or live action. The project will be assessed on the basis of the variety, effectiveness, and originality of the techniques you employed.

NOTE: This assignment represents the culmination of the course. I require my students' films to be ten minutes long, but feel free to adjust that requirement as per your preference. I also showcase these films in an annual student film festival. Oscar-like statuettes are easy to find online, are relatively inexpensive, and make great mementos. We award ten or so of the most popular categories, from Best Editing to Best Production and Design to Best Director and Best Film.

Giving Credit Where Credit Is Due: Collaborative Assessment Philosophy

It's not important whether you worked hard or not. Ultimately it's about how the movie is. Nothing else matters.

—P. S. ARJUN

Every student who has ever worked in a small group has experienced firsthand the difficulty of accurately assessing who did what. No one wants to be the member who did the lion's share of the work yet received the same grade as the group member who did little or nothing. The fact is, however, that for a variety of reasons, some students are simply more invested in the outcome of the assignment than others are.

Inevitably, for the teacher—who cannot possibly be present with every group every minute they are working—grading group projects poses problems. For example, what if one student winds up having to do most or all of the work? What if another student does not contribute at all? Should everyone receive the same grade? How is that equitable?

To satisfy all parties and to enable my students to feel a bit more invested in the process, I assess group projects as follows:

1. Each project will receive a score.
2. The score will be multiplied by the number of students who contributed to the project in order to determine a points total for the group.
3. Each group will meet, discuss peer and teacher feedback, and then determine just how much each group member contributed to the overall project. Once the group reaches consensus, the group will divide the points among

the group members. (In my own experience, while group members may easily misrepresent their contributions to the project to me, doing so with each other proves much more difficult. Those other group members were there; they know who did what—and who did not. As such, I almost never have students disagree when dividing points. Ultimately, however, if any group members *do* disagree, I ask everyone to write a “My Contribution to the Project” statement, after which I reserve the right to determine which group members should get which points.) Each group member may receive the same score if everyone worked equally; in the event the load was not evenly distributed, however, scores may vary within the group. In the end, students’ scores should add up to the total number of points as determined in step 2.

4. Once students are in agreement the points have been distributed fairly, they should sign beside their individual scores. Signing indicates agreement. If students do not sign off on their scores, I will meet with the group to determine proper point distribution.
5. As the teacher, I am the final authority on grades, which means that I may adjust them as I see fit.

If there is ever a need to discuss the grade or the contributions (or lack thereof) of particular group members, groups (or individual students) may make an appointment to speak with me outside of class. If a student is not contributing to their group, they may be removed from the group at my discretion. Any students removed from groups for not contributing will be required to complete an alternative assignment in order to receive credit.

Obviously, how you assess your students is up to you. Personally, I like this strategy because students feel more ownership in the process and they are better able to hold their group members accountable. Do students always agree with their group members’ assessment of their contributions? No, of course not. But the truth is that lying to me—the teacher—is easy. “Sure, I was there! I met with everybody! I did this and that. . . . Oh, absolutely!” And what do I know? I was not there. But lying to one’s group members is much more difficult. In all honesty, when I have been clear about the grading process in advance, I rarely have any disagreement among group members. They all know how much or little they contributed.

So what happens when groups *do* disagree? As a bit of a safety net, before groups split up their points, I ask them to write a reflection on the process. How, specifically, did you contribute to your group’s success? If a group cannot reach consensus, I read their reflections—which I keep confidential—before meeting

with them. We talk about how the group worked together, and then I assign a grade based on what I learn from the reflections and group conversation. I'm all for student ownership, but my college degree has to count for something, right? I'm the teacher; I'm the final authority. Even directors have to answer to producers.

Struggling to help students engage with print texts? Looking for ways to help them learn to analyze texts deeply in a hands-on, differentiated, and real-world environment? *Using Film to Unlock Textual Literacy* explores strategies for using film study and filmmaking to help students engage in entirely new ways with both print and digital texts.

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Robert B. Crisp has taught at Myers Park High School in Charlotte, North Carolina, for more than two decades. He has helped develop its popular Literature and Film program, where he conveys his undying love for and devotion to his family, Alfred Hitchcock, Guillermo del Toro, Kubrick-inspired conspiracy theories, and Black Keys Fridays.



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