Writing About Film
Critical Essays

SCENE
TAKE
ROLL
DATE
PROD. CO.
DIRECTOR
CAMERAMA
SOUND

screening shorts

resources

SCREENING SHORTS

SCREEN SCOTLAND
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General Rules for Critical Essays

Text Choice: CUTS

- **CHALLENGE:** Obviously you want to choose a text that the class will engage with, but you still want to challenge them and expand their horizons.
    - *After all, if we took the same approach with literature, we'd be unlikely to teach them Shakespeare or poetry – they'd rarely choose those!*

- **UNKNOWN:** Choose a text that the class are unlikely to have seen before, so have no preconceptions about it.

- **THEME:** Texts with a clear theme such as LGBTQI+ or gender issues, racism, good vs evil or loss of innocence are a good starting point.

- **SUITABLE:** Choose one that is neither too lightweight nor too overwhelming. Learning how to critically analyse a screen text is challenging enough without being faced with a film that has no thematic heft or is too obtuse.

For Your Consideration: Alternative Film Choices

Certificate: U / PG
- The Iron Giant (Brad Bird, 1999)
- The Kid Who Would Be King (Joe Cornish, 2019)
- Kubo and the Two Strings (Travis Knight, 2016)
- A League of Their Own (Penny Marshall, 1992)
- Ma Vie de Courgette (Claude Barras, 2016)
- Monster House (Gil Kenan, 2006)
- Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse (Bob Persichetti, Peter Ramsey & Rodney Rothman, 2018)
- Wadjda (Haifaa Al-Mansour, 2012)
- Whale Rider (Niki Caro, 2002)

Certificate: 12
- Belleville Rendez-Vous (Sylvain Chomet, 2003)
- Hunt for the Wilderpeople (Taika Waititi, 2016)
- Love, Simon (Greg Berlanti, 2018)
- Me and Earl and the Dying Girl (Alfonso Gomez-Rejon, 2012)
- The Night of the Hunter (Charles Laughton, 1955)
- The Outsiders (Francis Ford Coppola, 1983)
- Persepolis (Vincent Paronnaud & Marjane Satrapi, 2007)
- Searching (Aneesh Chaganty, 2018)
- Sing Street (John Carney, 2016)
- Vampires vs. the Bronx (Oz Rodriguez, 2020)

Certificate: 15
- The Adventures of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert (Stephan Elliott, 1994)
- Attack the Block (Joe Cornish, 2011)
- Dead Man Walking (Tim Robbins, 1995)
- Eighth Grade (Bo Burnham, 2018)
- The Ice Storm (Ang Lee, 1997)
- The Mist (Frank Darabont, 2006)
- Once (John Carney, 2007)
- Pride (Matthew Warcus, 2014)
- Small Faces (Gillies Mackinnon, 1995)
- Train to Busan (Sang-ho Yeon, 2016)
- Die Welle (Dannis Gansel, 2008)

Certificate: 18
- Battle Royale (Kinji Fukasaku, 2000)
- City of God (Fernando Meirelles & Kátia Lund, 2002)
- Dead Man's Shoes (Shane Meadows, 2004)
- Do the Right Thing (Spike Lee, 1989)
- Heathers (Michael Lehmann, 1989)
- L.A. Confidential (Curtis Hanson, 1997)
- Nil By Mouth (Gary Oldman, 1997)
- Shallow Grave (Danny Boyle, 1994)
- The Thing (John Carpenter, 1982)

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Using Evidence

- It's better to gather **two or three techniques** together **as one piece of evidence** (e.g. music, camera shot and lighting). Film meaning is created by the **combination of techniques**, rather than individual ones.

- A **brief description** of what is happening in the film at the moment techniques are used is vital.

- Context is everything: a close-up during a comedic moment will have a different meaning to one used during a scary moment.

- Ask yourself how the different techniques work together to become effective in that particular moment.

- The magic formula is: **Context + Technique (x Technique) = Effect.**

Discussing Techniques

Generally, there are techniques which are easier for young people to grasp and write about, and also demand less time and expertise to teach.

- **Mise-en-scène:** Young people get to grips with this quickly, especially costume, colour and set. A word bank of adjectives can help them hugely with articulating their ideas.

- **Sound:** Pupils do well here but, again, a word bank is invaluable for idea articulation.

- **Camerawork:** There are a lot of camera shots, angles and movements to cover, but pupils often comment very well on them. Just keep a camerawork guide handy!

- **Editing:** Requires a lot of time to get to the stage where pupils can confidently comment independently. Counting cuts to establish pace is an easy approach.

- **Dialogue and acting:** Easy to understand, but don't necessarily lead to comments of great insight.

- **Special effects:** Can comment on these in terms of establishing a setting or if discussing budget, but not always the most pertinent technique.

Scene Analysis Table

Techniques:

mise-en-scène (costume, props, set, lighting, actor position)

camerawork   editing   sound   special effects   dialogue and acting

Technique(s)	Context What is happening in that moment?	Effect How do the techniques work together to create an effect in that moment?

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PEEL Structure

The same **PEEL** structure can be used for a screen text essay as any other critical essay, but with a few little tweaks...

PEEL Structure	Sentence Starters
I make a **POINT** about the task and say what techniques were used.	Steven Spielberg uses _____, _____ and _____ effectively to convey...
I describe the moment the techniques were used in as **EVIDENCE**.	This can be seen in the moment/scene when...
I **EXPLAIN** what effect the techniques have and how they connect to my point.	The use of _____ suggests...while the _____ suggests... The overall effect is...
I make a **LINK** between my explanation and the theme/my personal response.	This links to the theme of _____ because... I think this is effective because...

ESSAY TASK:
How does Steven Spielberg use techniques to effectively create tension throughout 'Jaws'?

INTRODUCTION	TAPE Title/Text Author (Director) Plot Summary Essay Task			
	POINT	**EVIDENCE**	**EXPLANATION**	**LINK**
PEEL STRUCTURE	I make a **POINT** about the task and say what techniques were used.	I describe the moment the techniques were used in as **EVIDENCE**.	I make a **POINT** about the task and say I **EXPLAIN** what effect the techniques have and how they connect to my point.	I make a **LINK** between my explanation and the theme/my personal response.
SCENE 1: BEGINNING	Near the start of the film, Steven Spielberg uses _____, _____ and _____ effectively to create tension.	This can be seen in the moment /scene when…	The use of _____ suggests…while the _____ suggests… This works together to create tension because…	This links to the theme of _____ because… I think this is effective because…
SCENE 2: MIDDLE	Around the middle of the film, Steven Spielberg uses _____, _____ and _____ effectively to create tension.	This can be seen in the moment/ scene when…	The use of _____ suggests…while the _____ suggests… This works together to create tension because…	This links to the theme of _____ because… I think this is effective because…
SCENE 3: END	At the end of the film, Steven Spielberg uses _____, _____ and _____ effectively to create tension.	This can be seen in the moment/ scene when…	The use of _____ suggests…while the _____ suggests… This works together to create tension because…	This links to the theme of _____ because… I think this is effective because…
CONCLUSION	**TARA!** Text/Title Author (Director) Response to text Answer to task End with style!			

Critical Essay
BGE

Suggested Essay Tasks

- The same kinds of topics work for film as other texts:

> - **Trace the development of a character**
> - **Describe the impact of setting on the text**
> - **Trace a theme throughout the text**
> - **Describe how the filmmaker creates an atmosphere/mood/tone**

- **Five-paragraph essay structure:** the best approach is to choose evidence from the **beginning, middle and end** of the film for character and theme.

- You could also analyse a **single scene** from the film in depth, choosing **three key moments** of effective technique-use to make up your five-paragraph essay.

Sample PEEL Response: BGE

How does Steven Spielberg use techniques to effectively create tension throughout 'Jaws'?

Steven Spielberg uses **colour, camerawork** and **editing** effectively to create tension in the scene with Alex Kinter's death.

This can be seen in the opening moment when Alex asks his mum if he can go into the water again. The camera **tracks** Alex up from the water in a **long shot** and **doesn't cut away from him** until he walks past Brody and the focus turns to a new person. Alex is **wearing red swimming trunks**.

The use of the long tracking shot **combined** with the unbroken shot suggests that Alex will be important to the scene, while the red trunks suggest that his importance might be that he's in danger as red is the colour of blood. The **overall effect** creates tension because we know the shark is out there in the water and we now suspect that Alex could be its next victim.

I think this is effective because the audience are like Brody, waiting for the next killing, and by drawing our attention to Alex using these techniques, we become interested in his fate and are anxiously watching him, suspecting he will die, and are tense waiting for this to happen.

Critical Essay NQ

SQA Task: National 5/Higher

PART E — FILM AND TELEVISION DRAMA

Answers to questions on film and television drama* should refer to the text and to such relevant features as use of camera, key sequence, characterisation, mise-en-scène, editing, music/sound, special effects, plot, dialogue…

* 'TV drama' includes a single play, a series or a serial.

- Make sure that you are comfortable with all these terms before studying the film.

- Study multiple techniques in three/four key scenes only. Do not attempt to whole chunks of the film – it's too much!

- Choose key scenes from the beginning, middle and end of the film, and look for ones that address character, setting, plot, theme, etc. at once.

Sample PEEL Response: NQ

Choose a film or television drama in which there is a particularly tense or dramatic sequence. Explain how the film or programme makers use media techniques to achieve this effect. (Higher: 2016)

In 'The Mist', Frank Darabont uses **sound, camerawork** and **editing** in order to create tension in the scene where Dan runs into the supermarket right before it is enveloped by the mist.

There are **soft ambient sounds** of everyone standing at the checkouts which is broken by the **loud siren**, leaving this moment otherwise **almost completely silent**. The **editing** here shows us a series of **reaction shots** of all the key characters. The **silence** is broken by Dan bursting in and shouting; his run down the street into the shop is filmed with a **handheld camera**.

The tension here is created by the **contrast** between the siren and the silence – the absence of any other noise forces our focus on the siren (always an alarming noise) and makes it seems as though everyone is holding their breath, waiting for something, causing the audience to do the same. The editing **adds to this effect** as we are forced to wait, seeing only faces that reflect our own concern and nothing that may be happening outside making us curious and tense. We are shocked out of our poised tension by Dan's sudden arrival, with the **handheld camera breaking the stillness** of the moment and creating a sense of panic and chaos, causing the audience to feel as if they are running along with Dan and therefore share his fear.

I think the use of silence here is particularly important in creating tension due to its unexpected nature. Horror films traditionally use the musical score as a method of inducing an atmosphere of fear and tension (for example, the iconic music used in 'Jaws' and 'Psycho'). The audience is uneasy, partly because they are aware of that lack of expected music on some level – the unexpected silence is what is most disconcerting.

Past Exam Tasks: National 5

Emotional impact

1. Choose a scene or sequence from a film or TV drama which is **exciting or shocking or sad**. By referring to appropriate techniques, explain how this effect is created. *(2022)*

2. Choose a scene or sequence from a film or TV drama which **shocks or surprises you** in some way. By referring to appropriate techniques, show how in this scene or sequence the element of surprise is made effective. *(2016)*

3. Choose a scene or a sequence from a film or TV drama which has a **powerful impact** on the audience. By referring to appropriate techniques, explain how the director creates this impact. *(2017)*

Character

1. Choose a film or TV drama in which there is a **character about whom you have mixed feelings**. Show why this character is important to the film or TV drama as a whole and by referring to appropriate techniques, explain how these mixed feelings are created. *(2016)*

2. Choose a film or TV drama which has a **memorable character**. By referring to appropriate techniques, explain how the director makes the character memorable throughout the film or TV drama. *(2018)*

Past Exam Tasks: National 5

Conflict

1. Choose a film or TV drama in which two or more characters are involved in **conflict**. By referring to appropriate techniques, explain how this effect is created. *(2022)*

2. Choose a film or TV drama which involves **conflict**. By referring to appropriate techniques, explain how this conflict is explored. *(2019)*

Wild Cards!

1. Choose a film or TV drama which explores an **important issue**. By referring to appropriate techniques, explain how the director presents the issue in the film/TV drama as a whole. *(2017)*

2. Choose a scene or sequence from a film or TV drama in which **setting** is an important feature. By referring to appropriate techniques, explain how the director presents the setting in this scene or sequence. *(2018)*

3. Choose a scene or sequence from a film or TV drama in which an **atmosphere of suspense or tension or horror** is created. By referring to appropriate techniques, explain how this atmosphere is created. *(2019)*

Past Exam Tasks: Higher

Emotional impact

1. Choose a film or television drama in which a particular scene or sequence contains **tension or fear or surprise**. With reference to appropriate techniques, explain how the film or programme makers create this effect, and discuss how this adds to your appreciation of the film or television drama as a whole. *(2019)*

2. Choose a film or television drama in which there is a sequence which is particularly **moving or humorous or shocking**. With reference to appropriate techniques, discuss how the film or programme makers succeed in engaging the viewer's emotions or reactions. *(2018)*

3. Choose a film or television drama in which there is a particularly **tense or dramatic sequence**. Explain how the film or programme makers use media techniques to achieve this effect. *(2016)*

Past Exam Tasks: Higher

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1. Choose a film or television drama in which a **main character behaves in a selfish or unexpected or heroic way**. With reference to appropriate techniques, explain how the film or programme makers present this character and discuss how this adds to your appreciation of the film or television drama as a whole. *(2022)*

2. Choose a film or television drama in which a **main character either conforms to or challenges a stereotype**. With reference to appropriate techniques, explain how the film or programme makers create this character, and discuss how this adds to your appreciation of the film or television drama as a whole. *(2019)*

3. Choose a film or television drama in which the viewer feels engaged with a **character who is flawed or vulnerable**. With reference to appropriate techniques, discuss how the film or programme makers succeed in creating engagement with the character, and how this adds to your appreciation of the film or television drama as a whole. *(2018)*

4. Choose a film or television drama in which the **main character faces a significant moment of change**. With reference to appropriate techniques, discuss how the film or programme makers convey the significance of this change. *(2017)*

5. Choose a film or television drama which concerns an **individual or a group of characters facing a significant challenge**. Explain how the film or programme makers use media techniques to convey the significance of this challenge. *(2016)*

Past Exam Tasks: Higher

Wild Cards! (1)

1. Choose a film or television drama which engages the viewer because of its use of **visual and/or sound techniques**. With reference to appropriate techniques, explain how the film or television drama uses visual and/or sound techniques and discuss how this adds to your appreciation of the film or television drama as a whole. *(2022)*

2. Choose a film or television drama in which one sequence is effective in creating a particular **mood or atmosphere**. With reference to appropriate techniques, explain how this particular mood or atmosphere is created and discuss how this mood or atmosphere adds to your appreciation of the film or television drama as a whole. *(2022)*

3. Choose a film or television drama whose **soundtrack** contrasts with or fits the scene(s) it accompanies. With reference to appropriate techniques, explain how the film or programme makers' use of the soundtrack contributes to your appreciation of the film or television drama as a whole. *(2019)*

Past Exam Tasks: Higher

Wild Cards! (2)

1. Choose a film or television drama in which **setting** in time and/or place is important to the development of the central concerns. With reference to appropriate techniques, discuss how the setting in time and/or place enhances your appreciation of the film or television drama as a whole. *(2018)*

2. Choose a film or television drama in which the **opening sequence** is particularly effective in engaging the audience's interest. With reference to appropriate techniques, discuss how the film or programme makers succeed in engaging the audience's interest. *(2017)*

3. Choose a film or television drama in which **special effects** make an important contribution to the impact of the film or television drama as a whole. With reference to appropriate techniques, discuss how the special effects are used to enhance your appreciation of the film or television drama as a whole. *(2017)*

4. Choose a film or television drama which is targeted at a specific **audience**. Explain how the film or programme makers use media techniques to target this audience. *(2016)*

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