Understanding Film Writing Assignments
Adapted from Corrigan (1998)

Sometimes it is difficult to know how to best approach writing about television, film, or web media. Much of this process begins with understanding your assignment: this will have an impact on your purpose, audience, opinion, analysis, and research.

Is it a movie review?
This is written broadly for readers unfamiliar with the subject: people who might go see the film if they were given a spoiler-free outline of the story, some interesting side information about it, and a positive personal opinion about the film. This is a fairly common assignment, and can often be approached by splitting the paper in half between the story outline and personal perspective. Remember, a movie review can be positive or negative, but these opinions need to be backed up by objective observations and insightful connections.

Is it a theoretical essay?
This is written narrowly for readers very familiar with cinematic history, culture, and theory: people who are likely students or professors in the arts, interested in the ways films connect with other films, other art forms, or other theoretical perspectives. This assignment is essentially a research and synthesis paper: you will be expected to integrate the perspectives of one or more theorists into a paper that uses the source material to say something about film theory. Personal opinion, if appropriate at all, will be more about the application of the theory than the film itself.

Is it a critical essay?
This is written for readers with intermediate knowledge of film: people who will have already seen the film in question and desire a greater understanding of the work. This is a common assignment. It is best approached by finding (or following a prompt toward) a meaningful aspect of the film that can be explored further from a critical, analytical perspective. For example, you might choose the memorable opening or closing sequence of the film, a particular lighting/color style, or the anatomy of a chase scene. In order to defend your analysis, you may need to connect your argument to other examples in media or other theorists and critical writers.

A note about using opinions:
Art very often elicits powerful, subjective responses from people. When we write about film and media we can often struggle with our own tastes and preferences. The key is to know when these opinions are valuable to the argument and when they are harmful. In general, opinions are most insightful when they are balanced with personal reflections and reactions—not to mention a healthy dose of objectivity.