
Using film to introduce and develop academic writing skills among UK undergraduate students

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Abstract

This paper discusses the ways in which film can be used as a pedagogic means to introduce academic writing skills, based on the premise that, since viewing film is already a common literacy practice for many students, its use can help to facilitate learning inside the writing classroom. Specifically, the paper reports on an intensive six-week pilot programme of instruction at The University of Manchester, United Kingdom, which sought to use film as analogous to academic writing in terms of introducing students to concepts such as textual cohesion and coherence¹. Feedback from students indicates an appreciation of visual teaching methods as a means to explain academic writing conventions. A small increase in average student performance (pre- and post-instruction) is also noted.

Learning through the visual image

Several researchers (Knobel and Lankshear, 2003; Larson and Marsh, 2005; Livingstone and Bovill, 1999) have noted that a great many visual activities take

¹ Many of the concepts discussed here are found within the writing instruction given as part of the US *Freshman Composition* class, which, as Ivanic (1998, p 75) states, is becoming the basis for the theory and research of academic writing lecturers in the United Kingdom.

place in students' lives *outside* of the classroom, such as 'television, DVDs, computers, handheld computers, mobile phones and console games' (Larson and Marsh 2005, p 70). Indeed, today's students are exposed to more visuals than ever before. Not least of these is the Internet, which can be used for a variety of inherently visual purposes: to watch clips on youtube, create facebook, contribute to blogs, as well as to conduct academic research. Many students are also proficient with text messaging which involves the use of visual icons (i.e. emoticons), and computer games which often feature realistic images. In response, The New London Group (1996) argues for a need within the classroom for increased awareness of such diversified literacy practices. They mention, for example, multimedia technologies used for communicative purposes, such as visual design in desktop publishing, and suggest that using a visual pedagogic approach within the classroom is an effective way to capture students' attention and in doing so, facilitate learning.

Given the 'fast-moving developments in technology in society' (Larson and Marsh 2005, p 71), some researchers have also questioned whether the traditional, 'conservative bastions' of universities are ready for a more modern 'Games Generation' of students (Prensky 2001, p 196). However, McFarlane et al (2002) interpret the developments in more positive terms, focusing on the new pedagogic opportunities that arise and noting that computer games can contribute to personal development (e.g. motivation), language and literacy (e.g. listening skills), and creative development (e.g. use of imagination). Indeed, Cope and Kalantzis (1993, p 74) argue that literacy involves 'the mastery of a range of genres which use very different linguistic technologies' which, coupled with the belief of Lankshear and Knobel (2004a) that learning should be closely connected to the students' socio-cultural practices, suggests that computer games, for example, could be used within the classroom to facilitate learning skills (see also Gee 2003).

Therefore, the implication is that current technology could be better utilised, ideally by involving both visuals and activities in which students have existing proficiency. Horn (1998, p 247) states that 'integrating visual language into the schools will enable students to think in more complex ways', and Avgerinou and Ericson (1997, p 287) note that 'the way we learn, and subsequently remember, bears a strong relationship to the way our senses operate. This means that we, as educators, cannot afford to ignore the fact that a very high proportion of all sensory learning is visual.'

Whereas static images (e.g. shapes, icons, pictures) are the main focus of the above studies, this paper looks specifically at the potential benefits of using *moving* visual images (though one of the filmic visuals we used is static; see Table II). In this respect, our research is more comparable with that of Burn and Leach (2004). They explore the role that moving images play in young people's daily literacy practices and, like McFarlane et al (2002), argue that working with moving image media can lead to increased literacy. Reid et al (2002, p 3) suggest that such approaches can lead to the development of 'problem-solving, negotiation, thinking (and) reasoning' skills, and Horn (1998, p 172) notes that showing moving images (as opposed to film stills) 'increases the expressive possibilities of visual language'.

However, in many respects, it would appear that the classroom today is already visual in the ways that lessons are delivered, starting with class textbooks, a third of which, according to Horn (1998, p 248), are visual (though he does not specify the education level). Moreover, Power Point, overhead projectors and interactive whiteboards are now commonplace, and video is often used to teach students through non-traditional means, such as Distance Learning. Kress (2003, p 1) elaborates further, stating that there has been a 'broad move from the now centuries-long dominance of writing to the new dominance of the image, and, on the other hand, the move from the dominance of the medium of the book to the dominance of the medium of the screen'. Indeed, Burnett et al (2004, p 1) state that the UK education system is currently one in which 'Smart Boards replace blackboards and websites replace worksheets,' and Luke (2003, p 22) argues that literacy practices are 'less exclusively related to lexicosyntactic text and more to a foreground of complex iconography of pictures, symbols, moving images.' These statements underline the importance of a visual pedagogic approach and confirm that such approaches have received some critical attention in the literature. However, this paper seeks to focus on a less obvious visual approach which goes beyond the more 'traditional' visual aids of Power Point and interactive whiteboards - film, used here to include TV programmes, news reports and documentaries.

Using film in the classroom

One common way in which film can be utilised in the classroom is as an alternative means of delivering course material. Goldfarb (2002) notes that since the 1980s in the USA, there has been a turn toward using the moving image as a teaching method, and this practice is favoured by the Open University and, increasingly, by Distance Learning courses. The use of film/TV in the EFL classroom (very often in the form of videos which illustrate real-world English communication such as ordering a meal) is considered particularly useful as 'no teacher alone can reproduce the variety of situations, voices, accents, themes and presentation techniques that are a feature of this medium' (Hill 1999, p 2).

More specifically, with regard to a suggested connection between film and writing, the research of Kasper (2002) demonstrates how screenings can be used to help develop writing skills. In her study, she sought to help EFL students visualise the written material from three different courses – linguistics, environmental science and anthropology – by screening the following films: *Secret of the Wild Child* (a documentary about a child deprived of language exposure); *Savage Earth: The Restless Planet* (a documentary about earthquakes) and *Inherit the Wind* (a film about the Scopes 'Monkey Trial'). In this manner, she argued, 'film facilitates learning in several ways [providing] students with a graphic illustration of relevant content information' (Kasper 2002, p 52). By studying arguments within the film (e.g. the debate between science and religion in *Inherit the Wind*), students were able to transfer the knowledge gleaned by the film to their essays in terms of how to argue more effectively within a written academic context.

Masiello (1985) advocates using films in college composition classes as a means to brainstorm ideas around specific themes such as family relationships in films

including *The Godfather* and *Breaking Away*. He claims that this results in students listening and analysing more carefully and thereby performing better in their assessed essays. Moss (1987) advocates the use of soap operas in remedial composition classes in which, having watched a daytime soap opera in the classroom, students are asked to freewrite their innermost thoughts and feelings in preparation for a subsequent essay. Jeremiah (1987) investigates the use of news reports within the secondary and post-secondary writing classroom, arguing that their structure closely mirrors that of an academic essay (e.g. introduction, body, conclusion).

It would appear that the literature on the use of film within the classroom might be broadly divided into two groups: using film as an alternate and/or supplemental means to instruct students regarding class content; and using film within the composition classroom as a tool for pre-writing activities. However, there appears to be little research that focuses on using film specifically as a means to help students learn the academic writing conventions needed *beyond* the pre-writing stage.

Criticisms of and support for a filmic approach

We acknowledge that there may be criticisms of the filmic approach, not least the fundamental question: *Why not teach students essay writing in terms of essay writing rather than filmmaking?* The first response is that the filmic approach is supplemental and, therefore, the need for students to have more traditional instruction is not over-ridden. Such instruction includes areas in which films would be of limited (or no) use in the first instance, such as understanding how to construct a thesis statement and being able to reference correctly.

The comparison made between films and academic writing is a metaphorical one, which places the students as 'directors' of their essay assignments. The use of metaphor can lead to what Halliday (1994) calls 'incongruent' communication, that which does not state directly what is being referred to, so that encouraging students to regard themselves as 'directors' is an incongruent equivalent of students seeing themselves for what they actually are - *academic writers*. However, Halliday (1994, p 344) suggests that a balance is needed between the congruent and incongruent because 'something which is totally congruent is likely to sound a bit flat' and the 'totally incongruent often seems artificial and contrived' (p 344). We suggest that this balance can be achieved by focusing largely on a more 'congruent' teaching approach (i.e. discussing how to write essays in terms of essay writing) before introducing a more metaphorical approach involving film.

Elbow (1998), a key advocate of the use of metaphors to help students better understand the academic writing process, also exploits the aforementioned analogy of 'director', as well as 'editor', when describing the role of writing students. In this sense, students are ultimately responsible for the direction their essays take – 'directors' of everything from the overall structure to individual word choices. Likewise, they are 'editors' in that a finished draft is generally accomplished only after a great deal of deleting and cutting and pasting. We believe that such

metaphors need not result in a less clear manner of communication; rather, they are suggestive of a genre with which students are perhaps more familiar than academic writing - film. As Horn (1998, p 204) states: 'we live in a visual culture permeated by visual language'.

Kress and van Leeuwen (2006) further develop this idea (favouring the broad term of 'producer') by treating language and visual communication as being integrated. They therefore advocate the use of 'compatible language, and compatible terminology to speak about both' (p 177). Didion (1984, p 7) offers an example of this: 'to shift the structure of a sentence alters the meaning of that sentence, as definitely and inflexibly as the position of a camera alters the meaning of the object photographed'.

Elbow (1998) goes on to suggest that writing students should talk about their writing as a means to 'show' it to others. These 'showing procedures' (p 92) involve students describing their writing in terms of such diverse concepts as weather, voices and motion (to include, respectively, ideas such as *cloudy*, *loud* and *slow*). Similarly, Wyrick (2002, p 325) states that 'figurative language produces images or pictures in the readers' minds, helping them to understand unfamiliar or abstract subjects'. In fact, the use of metaphors within academic writing textbooks is common, with Wyrick (2002, p 122) noting that 'fuzzy sentences are often the result of fuzzy thinking' ('fuzzy' here being a metaphor for 'unclear'). We believe that such visual language can 'speak' to students more effectively than traditional, 'academic' language. As Elbow states, 'metaphors make a big difference' (p 18).

The aforementioned concepts that can form in students' minds based on the use of a visual approach are referred to as *schema* by Flower and Hayes (1984) and as *mental images* by Collins (1998). Collins (1998, p 161) believes that these images and representations of the writing task can be a useful tool in helping students to develop a firmer understanding of academic writing. This can include, for example, visualising one's essay subject and what one wishes to say, and constructing a visual plan of one's essay, such as a diagram consisting of one's thesis and topics. Oshima and Hogue (2006, p 268) regard pre-writing methods as a means by which 'one idea will spark another idea', thus a referral to mental concepts (hence visuals). Therefore, if visuals are already in use within composition classes, in terms of technology (e.g. Power Point) and pre-writing exercises (e.g. freewriting, with its inherent mental processing), then the inclusion of 'filmic visuals' is likely to make for a more real-world, hence accessible, addition.

A final point to make concerns the fact that some educators bemoan the ubiquity of visual culture in today's society, such as that used as part of text messaging, believing that it contributes to declining standards in reading ability, for example. Horn (1998, p 247) concedes that there are 'visual distractions', such as television, which 'keep (students) from other educational activities' (ibid). However, he then reaffirms that visuals should be used as a *supplemental* pedagogic tool, which can 'enable students to think in more complex ways and to make better decisions through more skilful analysis' (ibid). This research also treats film as a

supplemental tool, not a dominant one, arguing that visual texts can ‘help articulate the content of a print text’, such as an essay (Kasper 2002, p 52).

The Pilot Programme: how film was used to instruct the students

The academic writing instruction took place at The University of Manchester, United Kingdom, in a Year One class entitled Aspects of Language, which was taken by 31 undergraduate students, none of whom had previously received any specific instruction in academic writing, at least not within the context of a formal course unit. The writing instruction lasted for six weeks, with each class lasting for one hour. On the final day of the instruction, questionnaires were given to the students in order that qualitative feedback might be obtained. Feedback collected from these questionnaires will be reported throughout the following sections. In order to provide a broad comparison of students’ academic performance pre- and post-instruction, we also compared students’ essay grades for this second semester unit with those written as part of a similar, semester one language-based course.

This investigation did not assume that its participants had previous knowledge of Film Studies when they entered university. As such, the authors are not in complete agreement with a claim made by Lankshear and Knobel (2003a) suggesting that students need be knowledgeable *per se* regarding the particular visual medium which is used in the classroom. In other words, we do not believe that academic writing students need be familiar with filmic terms such as *low-angled shot*, *jump-cut editing* and *breaking the fourth wall* in order to appreciate this approach, since film is being used to help them understand academic writing and not as a topic of study in itself. What now follows is a discussion of the ways in which various components of academic writing were taught using a filmic approach.

The introduction paragraph

The introduction paragraph of an essay can be compared with the introduction of a film, as both serve to set the scene, as it were, for the viewer/reader. In terms of essay introductions, there is the need for a thesis which is the essay’s statement of purpose, its main point. Two other aspects of introduction paragraphs which have direct relevance to films involve constructing an interesting opening statement – the ‘hook’ – and providing background information about the essay’s subject and focus.

The hook is described by Wyrick (2002, p 83) as a means ‘to catch the readers’ attention’, with Neman stating (1995, p 120) that ‘an exciting opening is better than a dull one’. In essays, effective opening sentences can include rhetorical questions, quotations and proverbs, among other devices. While films may be regarded by some as a two hour hook based purely on their visual nature, it is also true that a film can often rely on an attention grabbing opening, an example of which is provided shortly with the film *Halloween* (1978).

In addition, the purpose of providing background information about the essay’s subject is obvious, as it helps to orient the reader, in addition to explaining why the topic needs to be considered. For example, Oshima and Hogue (2007, p 60) discuss

the use of a ‘funnel’ approach, in which students begin their essays with broad information about their subject before arriving at the narrower focus of the essay’s thesis. Smith (1999, p 105) further states that the purpose of an introduction paragraph is ‘to lead the audience into the piece of writing’, and providing background information is a key part of this process.

To help students visualise the importance of constructing an effective opening and providing background information within their introductory paragraphs, a portion of the opening of the film *Halloween* was shown in class (i.e. starting with the end of the opening theme tune which leads into the first scene). Student engagement was high; two even asked if the lights could be switched off and the curtains drawn to enhance the mood. Students were asked to jot down notes as they watched the film’s opening, in order to establish the following:

- How does the film’s opening grab your attention?
- What background information is provided about the film?

After watching the clip, the students were asked to discuss their responses to the two questions. Specifically, the opening of the film places the house (in which a murder is about to take place) in the foreground, thus emphasising its prominence, with darkness surrounding it. The house is illuminated with a bright, almost ghostly, white light. This technique is known as *subjective camera* (Nelmes 2007), in which the audience sees everything from the subject’s point of view, thus ‘becoming’ the killer, as he stalks the house, enters through the back door and takes a knife from the kitchen drawer.

Regarding background information for an essay’s main subject, a comparison can be made with the way films also background the action which is to follow later, sometimes showing the audience the causes of later events, for example. In the case of *Halloween*, the very first shot, which appears prior to the introduction of the house, presents the ‘cinematic reader’ with necessary details, which are written across a black screen. The reader is told the ‘where’ and ‘when’ of the murder that is about to take place:

Haddonfield, Illinois

October 31st, 1963

The opening murder provides background information regarding events which occur later, in 1978, when the young boy returns to his hometown to kill again. Thus, the audience is told how things began, just as an introduction paragraph prepares the reader for the information that follows within the essay’s body. Therefore, an audience would have a good idea of what to expect *later* in the film, based on having been given background information *first*.

The relevant aspect of the instruction is that, through the use of film, students are helped to *visualise* how an effective opening might be composed within the context of their essays. Thus, the film clip (or any visual aid for that matter) is a tool which students can use when preparing their essays, having been offered a ‘real world’ visual aid first. One student commented that the use of this film’s opening was

thought provoking; I thought the introduction to Halloween was a good representation of the components of a good introduction'. Other comments included 'Film clips highlighted well the need for structure' and 'using film clips was an interesting approach because it provided a better understanding to some of the issues related to academic writing

Unity and cohesion

Unity refers to maintaining a consistent focus within an essay and not deviating from the thesis provided in the introduction. Neman (1995, p 148) states that 'if students have focused their entire paper upon supporting their central point, their papers will automatically be unified' and advises teachers that 'we must urge our students to be brutal in eliminating any material they find not to the point' (ibid).

Cohesion is achieved within writing of any kind when it can be determined that the component parts of a text are related to one another: more than simply achieving appropriate syntax, the writer must ensure that the reader is guided from one part of the text to another, leading to 'connections between sentences' (Kolln 1999, p 40). O'Brien (1989, p 1) uses a visual analogy to demonstrate this, saying that 'as we read a text we need to feel that we are following a thread of meaning. The thread has been placed there by the writer and if it has been well placed it can be followed by the reader'. Dix (2008, p 56) echoes this idea within film, saying that a film viewer is 'stitched into' the film's spectacle (i.e. he/she can easily follow the action from one scene to the next) via the editing process. This 'stitching-in' effect is known as *suture*.

Films rely on cohesion in that, according to Metz (1991), they are also composed of sentences and paragraphs, part of filmic grammar. Horn (1998, p 155) further discusses filmic punctuation, which includes devices such as dissolves, cuts and fades, all of which 'can be thought of metaphorically as forms of punctuation' (ibid). Here it can be seen how the components of essay writing, even grammar, have a cinematic counterpart. Metz contends that a shot of film is roughly equivalent to a sentence, but the pioneering Russian film director Sergei Eisenstein contended that an individual shot of film (i.e. equivalent to a filmic 'photograph') is equivalent to a *word* and that a filmic sentence was a *scene*. Regardless of terminological disagreement, the fact remains that filmic sentences exist (shots or scenes), and, as such, these cinematic sentences need to blend into each other in a logical manner so that the filmic reader is not left disoriented. This is achieved by editing, 'the joining together of separate pieces of film' and 'a juxtaposition between one shot and the next' (Nelmes 2007, p 77).

Specifically, it is continuity editing, 'a distinctive form of editing associated with smoothness' (Dix 2008, p 49), which serves 'to maintain the viewer's understanding of, and engagement with, the story' (Nelmes 2007, p 78). This is achieved by ensuring that there is a logical sequence from one film scene into the next, logical from a temporal perspective but, at a narrower level, logical also in that each scene builds on that which preceded it. This is related to cohesion within an essay, with Halliday (1985, p 310) stating that 'the selection of [lexical] items that are related in

some way to those that have gone before' is one means by which cohesion can be achieved.

The result of such cohesive devices is that readers are continually being reminded of what they read and processed in their mind previously while, at the same time, they are processing new information. This is known as the 'given-new principle'² (O'Brien 1992), and Kress and van Leeuwen (2006, p 180) state that it 'applies also within an image'. Therefore, if shots or scenes of film are regarded as cinematic sentences, filmic cohesion can also be said to rely on the 'given-new' principle. The clip used to illustrate this was taken from the opening to the film, *Diamonds are Forever* (1971).

If we assume this film's opening to be the cinematic equivalent of an introduction paragraph, then first we need to locate the thesis. From this perspective, the film's opening was analysed on the following levels:

THESIS: An exposition informing us about Bond's worldwide manhunt for Blofeld (*Blofeld is his arch enemy – the villain with the white cat*).

Once again, students were prompted, in this case with the following two questions:

- Determining unity – Does each and every cinematic sentence relate to the thesis?
- Determining sentence cohesion – Does each cinematic sentence refer back to information contained within previous sentences and offer new information at the same time?

It needs to be pointed out that for purposes of analysis the students were told to regard the scenes, not shots, as sentences. This was not to show agreement with Eisenstein *per se*, but rather for practical reasons (because it is more difficult to mentally process a multitude of shots than scenes). The film's opening is very tightly edited into a sequence of events:

1. Bond throws a Japanese assassin through a partition. He asks the location of Blofeld and is informed by the assassin that Blofeld is in Cairo.
2. Cut to Cairo where a man in a fez is sitting at a gambling table, only to be accosted by Bond, who asks 'Where can I find him', to which the man replies 'Ask Marie.'
3. Cut to a young woman lying on a sun bed who asks the approaching Bond 'Who are you?' to which he replies with the famous cinematic line, 'My name is Bond, James Bond.' He then strangles the girl with her bra and once again asks the location of Blofeld.

² Or the 'known-new contract' (Kolln 1999).

4. Next scene: a plastic surgeon's hospital, where we see Blofeld himself demanding to have his plastic surgery operation brought ahead of schedule.
5. Finally, all the remaining action takes place in an underground lair within the hospital, where Bond has gained entry, looking for Blofeld. Having killed a man he thinks to be Blofeld himself, Bond is then confronted by the 'real' Blofeld (actually, another clone). A fight ensues; Bond overpowers the henchmen and pushes Blofeld into a lake of hot lava, after which Blofeld's omnipresent white cat screeches at Bond. Here ends the opening sequence.

UNITY – *Does each and every cinematic sentence relate to the thesis?*

Students all agreed that each cinematic sentence relates back to the thesis. A thesis which seeks to explain Bond's worldwide manhunt for his enemy is illustrated by the locations involved – Japan, Egypt and France – as well as the repetition of Blofeld's name throughout the film's opening.

SENTENCE COHESION – *Does each cinematic sentence refer back to information contained within previous sentences and offer new information at the same time?*

It was also agreed that there is a logical connection from one sentence into the next, achieved in part by the given-new principle (as shown in Table I). Though it makes no difference where Bond's hunt begins, one thing leads to another in a logical sequence. For example, in sentence one, we hear Bond ask 'Where is *he*?'; in sentence two, we hear Bond ask 'Where can I find *him*?'; in sentence three, we Bond asks 'Where is *Ernst Stavro Blofeld*?'. This repetition of 'Blofeld', whether direct or pronominal, ensures that each sentence relates to what has gone before, while simultaneously providing new information (e.g. each new location that Bond visits).

Table 1. Filmic unity and cohesion: *Diamonds are Forever*

SCENE	GIVEN	NEW
1	Not applicable; all the information is new as it's the first scene.	Bond is on a hunt for someone, asking the question 'where is Blofeld?' He is simply told 'Cairo!'
2	We are now in <i>Cairo</i> (suggested by the decoration and clothing); Bond asks 'where can I find <i>him</i> '; these are both references to scene one.	Bond is told to 'ask Marie'
3	We see Bond at a beach approaching an attractive	Bond asks 'where is Ernst Stavro <i>Blofeld</i> '?

	woman, presumably <i>Marie</i> .	
4	Cut to <i>Blofeld</i> himself in his lab.....	

Positive responses to the use of the Bond film clip and the filmic approach overall, include the following: ‘References to films were good, particularly James Bond – good for introduction’; ‘I like the use of the Bond film to reinforce the idea of linking sentences in an essay’; ‘visual aids were really helpful. I really liked watching video clips and comparing it to the structuring of essays’. Negative responses to the pilot programme will be discussed later.

Structure and Coherence

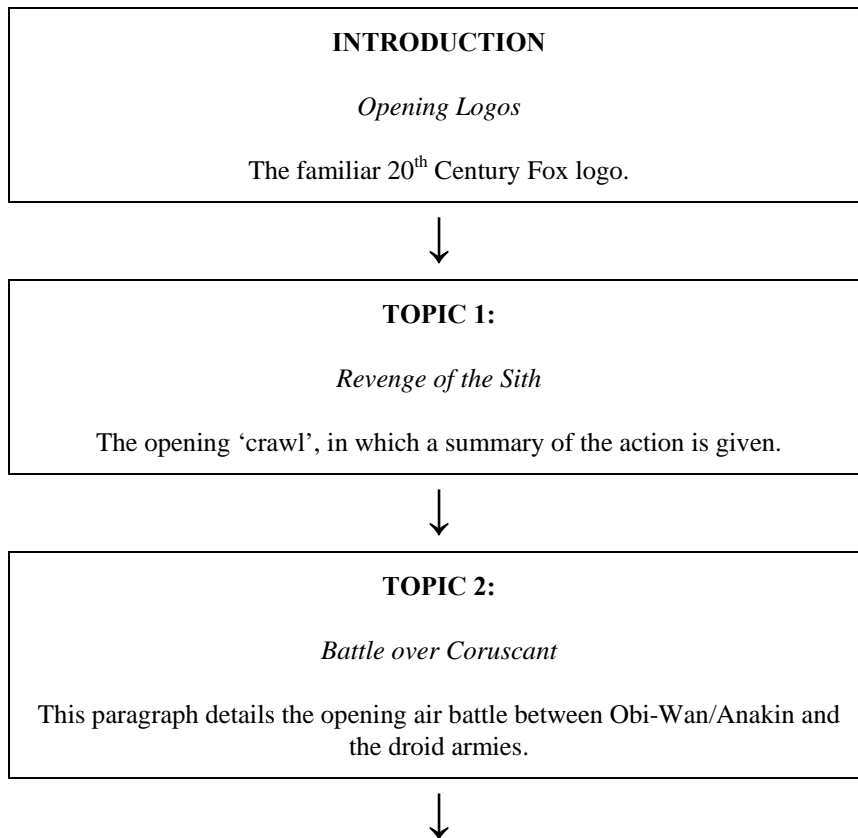
Unlike cohesion, which ‘generally refers to connections between sentences’ (Kolln 1999, p 40), coherence refers to ‘the global features that characterise a text’ (ibid) and is therefore more macro-level. In academic writing terms, coherence often refers to the basic structure of an essay, such as introduction – body – conclusion, to include an abstract and literature review for research papers. Wyrick (2002, p 70) states that coherence ‘means that all the sentences and ideas in your paragraph flow together to make a clear, logical point about your essay’. In other words, coherence gives the reader ‘a sense of logical movement and order (p 71)’ which is usually accomplished through the maintenance of one topic per body paragraph (encouraged for average length essays of, say, 1000 – 2000 words).³ Thus, the global features that comprise essay coherence range from individual paragraphs which focus on one topic at a time, to the overall structure of the essay itself.

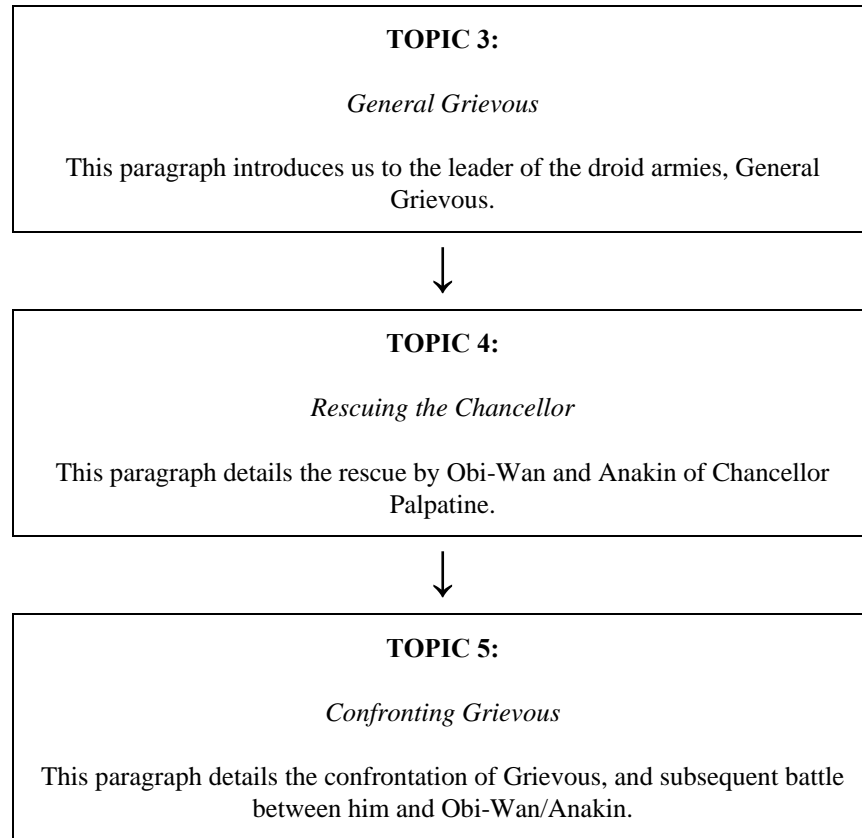
To show cinematic coherence, the visual aid was taken from information provided with the DVD of the film *Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith* (2005). DVDs essentially provide a coherent framework for the entire film in that they outline the various ‘filmic paragraphs’ for viewers as part of the DVD menus, which consist of sections of film. From a purely filmic point of view, this allows viewers to jump to a particular section of film if they so desire. However; from an essay writing point of view, we can see how the film is divided into ‘body paragraphs’, each of which combine to produce the aforementioned ‘logical movement and order’. This relates to the concept of narrative coherence, essentially meaning that a film’s plot is easy to follow, in part because the cinematic sentences combine to form a recognisable sequence (Metz 1991) which maintains ‘the momentum of storytelling’ by minimising ‘spatial and temporal anomalies in the filmic world’ (Dix 2008, p 55). Continuity editing plays a large role in this ‘with its emphasis upon fluency, clarity and coherence’ (ibid).

³ The term ‘topic’ is used here as this is the commonly accepted term used to refer to the individual subjects within each body paragraph (Elbow 1998; Wyrick 2002; Oshima and Hogue 2007).

We suggest that a sequence of film is relatable to an essay’s body paragraph and a filmic paragraph consists of a series of scenes which depict a major part of the overall filmic narrative. Likewise, Bellour (1986) states that filmic coherence is achieved when scenes are linked together to create a given segment of film. Deciding how to classify a given sequence of a film as a ‘body paragraph’ (or a ‘sequence’ or ‘segment’ in filmic terms) can be linked to the film’s genre. We might, for example, expect a heterosexual romance to very broadly involve *boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy wins girl back*, with each of the three segments/sequences equivalent to a narrative ‘paragraph’. Inevitably, of course, there could be many more paragraphs within the film, depending on how much depth one wishes to analyse. Though this is a somewhat crude approach, it nonetheless helps to show how scenes, like sentences, combine to produce a coherent chunk of film. Table II helps to show how filmic paragraphs relate to one another in *Star Wars – Episode III: Revenge of the Sith*:

Table 2. Filmic structure and coherence: Star Wars – Episode III: Revenge of the Sith





From the point of view of body paragraphs within an essay, each filmic paragraph has its own topic (italicised in Table II), giving the viewer necessary information about that particular section of film. Thus, students are being taught how to construct individual paragraphs within an essay, and how the paragraphs might combine to produce an overall body of information.

Evaluation of the Pilot Programme

This section presents an analysis of the degree to which the academic writing instruction could be considered successful. Table III shows the results of students' essay performance before and after the classes.

Table 3. Comparison of essay scores

Student	Pre-Instruction	Post-Instruction	+/-
<i>001</i>	63	60	-3
<i>002</i>	60	63	+3

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003	70	55	-15
004	40	50	+10
005	80	70	-10
006	55	63	+8
007	59	64	+5
008	64	63	-1
009	66	62	-4
010	61	60	-1
011	58	65	+7
012	64	67	+3
013	42	38	-4
014	48	60	+12
015	60	68	+8
016	63	61	-2
017	39	57	+18
018	50	59	+9
019	62	72	+10
020	38	68	+30
021	75	66	-9
022	52	64	+8
023	67	65	-2
024	68	62	-6
025	40	50	+10

USING FILM TO DEVELOP ACADEMIC WRITING SKILLS

026	68	72	+4
027	62	58	-4
028	66	63	-3
029	59	60	+1
030	63	65	+2
031	55	63	+8
Average:	58.61	61.74	+3.13

Quantitative analysis of a small-scale, pilot project of this nature is always problematic, not least because so many outside factors affect students' performance. Nonetheless, we felt that plotting individual and average grades across two comparable units was likely to provide *some* insight into the effectiveness of the writing instruction, however limited. As Table III shows, the essays written post-instruction have a higher overall average score, and, of the thirty-one students, eighteen achieved a higher score within their post-instruction essay and thirteen a lower score. While the difference in overall average scores is not great, just 3.13%, it is sufficient to place the post-instruction essay scores into a higher classificatory band.⁴

Writing proficiency takes time to develop and, therefore, the decision to compare two essays written within a short period of each other may seem unusual. However, this decision was taken to reduce the likelihood that any improvement identified was attributable to the length of time (e.g. one year or more) between writing the two different essays.

Given the problems inherent to a qualitative evaluation, questionnaires were also distributed to students, 22 of which were returned. The first of the three questions was perhaps the most relevant to the interpretation of the overall increased scores:

⁴ Within the University's marking scheme, a score of 70 or above is considered 'first class', and signifies that the student's writing is exceptional, clearly focused, original and demonstrates a firm grasp of grammar and style. A second class score, ranging from 60 – 69, indicates an overall assessment of 'very good' and is thus comparable to a grade of B. Scores in the band of 50 – 59 are comparable to a grade of C, 'average', and 40 – 49, while a passing score band, is considered a minimal pass nonetheless. From the average scores, then, it can be seen that the students have indeed shown improvement, by moving from one score band to the next higher.

1. Do you feel that your actual academic writing has improved? Explain why or why not.

The students' responses were as follows: four students, perhaps unsurprisingly, stated that they would have to wait for the marks for the essay to be delivered before they could honestly answer this question, as seen in the response of *'have not had chance to see an improvement yet. No marks back'*. Similarly, three students commented that they felt the need for more essay writing before they could accurately answer the question. One student perhaps summed up the previous views, with the response of *'time will tell!'*

However, thirteen students answered that they did feel their writing had improved. Comments included the following:

- *I now know exactly what I should be looking to include and stylistically how I should approach an essay.*
- *I think so because my writing is more fluent and coherent.*
- *My writing has improved. I am more careful when proofreading my essays.*
- *Hopefully yes. I feel that I have a much clearer idea of what is necessary to obtain higher marks.*

The remaining student answered, *'not really'*. This is ambiguous as it could indicate that the instruction was not useful to him/her in its intentions or simply that the student already felt confident in his/her writing ability prior to taking the class. If this is the case, then the individual may have felt that there was little about academic writing that he/she had yet to learn.

The second question elicited a broader range of responses:

2. Please tell us your opinion of the visual approach taken within the instruction of academic writing. As much as possible, refer to actual lectures, handouts and any other relevant teaching materials.

In total, seventeen students responded positively to this statement. A sample is provided below:

- *Gave a different perspective to the subject, helped me reflect more on my practice and style.*
- *The visual approach was new to me and very interesting.*
- *I like the fact that he used analogy to get the point across. That helped the learning process by relating it to real things. The videos as well were good.*
- *The visual approach was largely effective in informing on academic writing. It was easy to relate to and generally interesting.*

- *I like visuals in lectures. It is easier to keep concentration than just listening.*

On the other hand, five students were negative in their questionnaire feedback. Their criticisms were as follows:

- *Useful but sometimes overdone.*
- *Possibly too many analogies.*
- *I didn't really like the visual approach. I prefer to have handouts with more written information. I don't mind some metaphors but sometimes I feel it would be more beneficial to explain it in a more simple way.*
- *Some of the visual stuff to help us picture structure etc. in our minds was a bit childish in my view.*
- *Perhaps don't put so much focus on a visual approach.*

These comments show that for some students a more direct approach without the use of metaphor works best. However, we suggest that in a class of thirty-one students (though only twenty-two attended on the final day when the questionnaires were administered), these comments represent a minority viewpoint.

3. Do you feel that your understanding of academic writing has improved? Explain why or why not.

All twenty-two students answered this question in the affirmative. This is interesting because although some students did not necessarily appreciate the visual approach, they still believed that their understanding of academic writing had improved. Ultimately, this question is perhaps most relevant to the study overall. Though this research focused on the use of visuals as a means to help students learn, it is not centred on a 'visual classroom' *per se*. Visuals are essentially a means to an end, the end being to help students learn about academic writing. With this in mind, it is suggested that the study has been successful in achieving its goal. Examples of students' answers to question 3 included:

- *Definitely! From simple referencing, through to style I have a greater understanding of what makes a good essay.*
- *Yes, we've gone into quite a lot of detail. I wasn't aware of a thesis beforehand, but now I am.*
- *Yes – realise now what is essential in an assignment.*
- *Yes, because I have become more aware of different aspects of academic writing.*

The present study is comparable with that of Hoadley-Maidment (1997), who investigated the writing development of native English speakers over a period of six months within an Open University setting. Though this time-frame was relatively short, the students nonetheless developed and acknowledged a keener understanding of academic writing, such as how best to construct introductions and produce a

coherent finished essay. Qualitative feedback from students involved with this pilot programme would suggest that similar progress has been made.

Conclusions and Limitations

Though we argue that the incorporation of a filmic approach is a useful pedagogic tool within academic writing instruction, we also acknowledge the limitations of this study. Specifically, the two essays chosen for comparison are both written in the first year of students' undergraduate study and this makes it difficult to assess how much students have improved within such a short amount of time (especially in light of students' responses to question 1, in which eight indicated that it was too soon to judge).

Second, it is not possible, absolutely speaking, to determine how much students' writing has improved based on just one period of instruction. Moreover, some students actually achieved lower scores after receiving instruction in academic writing, despite the overall average score increase of 3.13%. Nonetheless, this project has been successful in acting as a pilot study for the use of film in academic writing pedagogy and remains an instructive contribution to wider theoretical debates about Visual Literacy. We now report on our three main findings:

1. The approach is seen as unique and interesting. Feedback suggests that using film as a teaching method can capture students' interest and help them to learn more effectively. Comments from students in this project reflect those offered by the EFL students in Kasper's study (2002) which were 'overwhelmingly positive' (p 57) and included the comment that the use of film (albeit for a different pedagogic purpose than ours), 'let [students] study the material in a different way' (ibid). Kasper succinctly states that 'film facilitates learning' (p 52) and we suggest that its familiarity to students and their enjoyment of such a medium is a key contributory factor. The effectiveness of using film to teach writing also ties in with the research of Burn and Leach (2004) who state that using the moving image in classrooms is motivational and can lead to increased literacy.

2. The metaphorical aspects of the approach help students to learn by visualising the subject (supporting the research of Flower and Hayes (1984) and Collins (1998)). Filmic visuals can inspire schema or mental images which, as discussed earlier, can render complex information into simpler language (Collins 1998, p 161). This belief is echoed by Horn (1998, p 247) who states that visual language 'anchors abstract in concrete', and Elbow (1998) who suggests that metaphors (visual or linguistic) need not impinge on the clarity of the lecture but can in fact support it. The students in Kasper's study (2002, p 57) reflected that the films 'show them how to put an essay together', with Kasper further commenting that seeing a film helped the students to visualise a concept that might have been unclear initially.

Further, the issue of being able to relate to the material is suggestive of an approach to learning which might tap into students' own daily literacy routines, in this case film-watching, and, in doing so, support the research of The New London Group

(1996). Prensky (2001) and Larson and Marsh (2005) advocate the need for educators to be aware of students' outside literacy practices and, in the words of Lankshear and Knobel (2004b), teachers need to consider ways in which they can better reach their 'digitally at home' students by supplementing traditional teaching methods with visual pedagogy. As Post (1987) reminds us, students live in a media-oriented world and thus consider sight and sound as 'user friendly'.

3. For some students, the filmic approach was not appreciated. A minority of participants would indeed have preferred a more congruent manner (Halliday 1994) of instruction. As there is scant information regarding the potential drawbacks of visual pedagogy, such responses are difficult to interpret. It may be that these students are not visual learners by nature, or that their choice of visual aid might involve a more typical medium, such as analysing academic essays and having classroom lectures which utilise Power Point. While Comprone (1987, p 1) acknowledges students' 'visual acuity' and the power of the visual image to 'mesmerise and energise today's students', he also notes that 'we still do not know very much about putting together reading, writing, and seeing sequences that will help students make all media experiences part of one integrated composing process'.

Though the qualitative feedback within our study is limited to students' questionnaires, the overwhelming majority of students nonetheless appreciated the visual approach as a means to help them realise the conventions of academic essay writing. This, coupled with the quantitative indicator of improved essay grades, suggests that the pilot study can be considered a success. Indeed, based on the need for educators to bring into the classroom the technological world with which learners are most familiar, we argue that film is one of the more effective methods of engaging today's generation of students. According to Kress and van Leeuwen (2006, p 17) 'writing is itself a form of visual communication'; therefore, we suggest that film is a legitimate (and currently underused) supplementary pedagogical tool for the teaching of writing skills.

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