

Writing the Evaluation Essay

Evaluation is a key high-order thinking skill used frequently in the workplace and a common format for many of the editorials published in newspapers and news magazines. This mode of thinking involves much more than a quick judgment about a person, place, object or service. The judgment must be based on carefully analyzed standards or criteria, a key component in every evaluation. These standards or criteria help the individual "measure" how well a subject meets up to or falls short of the ideal.

Students begin with shorter writing assignments that evaluate one topic and progress to the three – four page evaluation paper itself which challenges them to consider two subjects---products, films, websites, etc.—and select the better one based on how well it meets the expectations they have established in a set of criteria. In the process, students move through the stages of higher-order thinking.

- *Analysis* breaks the writing project into pieces to determine what qualities an individual looks for in the evaluation process. What are the most important factors to consider when one purchases a car or chooses a gym? What components work together to make a good romantic comedy or a crime drama?
- *Evaluation* involves the study of each subject and how well it meets the qualities determined in analysis. How well does a particular car comply with safety standards? How effective is the equipment at a specific gym? How convincing is the chemistry between two characters in a romantic comedy or a crime drama?
- *Synthesis* draws from additional sources to help the writer arrive at a conclusion and confirm his or her findings. What do the editors of *Consumer Reports* reveal about the gas mileage of a particular model of car? What does a survey of local customers suggest about a specific gym? What does film critic Roger Ebert say about the credibility of the actors in a particular film?

One Student's Experience with the Evaluation Essay

In her Composition II class, nineteen-year-old **Kate Herrington** is faced with the task of determining which of two films has the greater value based on criteria she selects. Inspired by Stieg Larson's best-selling book, *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*, she selects two film perspectives of Larson's work.

In her first rounded paragraph Kate not only draws her audience into her paper with the details of the experience which led her to select these films, her thesis identifies the criteria she uses to examine each film and communicates her conclusion regarding the better film.

Elegant yet Haunting: An Evaluation of the Swedish and American Film

Adaptations of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*

A few months ago, a copy of the 2008 best-selling novel, The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo, found its way into my possession. Penned by the now-deceased journalist and author, Stieg Larsson, this Swedish crime novel quickly became one of my favorite books. More recently I was encouraged by a friend to watch both the Swedish and the American film adaptations of the novel. I was uneasy about this notion, as any avid reader would be. How could a movie successfully bring to life a story so elegant, yet haunting? My doubts were in vain, however, I realized after viewing the films. Both adaptations were splendid, but one emerged superior. Though the Swedish adaptation is well-beloved abroad, when the viewer considers loyalty to the original storyline, embodiment of the characters, and entertainment value, they will find that it is ultimately outdone by the American version.

In the two paragraphs that follow, Kate uses the block by block method, providing a detailed summary of each film in separate paragraphs that, in turn, address her first criterion: how faithfully each film version reflects the novel.

The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo is an intricate tale of murder, fraud, and family scandal. Alex Berenson, a book critic for the New York Times, described the original novel as a “thoroughly ugly view of human nature.” Such a complex plot proved difficult to bring to life. However, the 2011 American film, directed by David Fincher, does an impressive job of staying true to the original sequence of events. The story’s protagonist, Mikael Blomkvist, is a journalist whose legal troubles comprise generous portions of the opening and closing segments of the novel. Fincher’s adaptation follows suit. The central plot – an investigation of the disappearance of a wealthy teenage girl some forty years prior – is also followed closely by the American film. Fincher’s version does slightly deviate from the original fate of the missing girl, though, as well as neglects to include a few fascinating, though inconsequential, subplots. These omissions, however, are necessary to condense a 500-page novel into a 158-minute film. According to New York Times critic A. O. Scott, Fincher’s adaptation “manages to hold on to the vivid and passionate essence of the book while remaining true enough to its...plot.” This faithfulness to the original novel is the American film’s most advantageous quality.

In addition, in the paragraphs above and below, note how Kate relies on the expertise of film critics A.O. Scott and Betsy Sharkey who each comment on the film’s adaptation of the book.

This adaptation’s earlier counterpart, the 2009 Swedish film directed by Niels Arden Oplev, is nearly identical in length. However, this two-and-a-half-hour-long movie fails to incorporate much of the original content. In her review for the Los Angeles Times, Betsy Sharkey explains that Oplev performed “some major renovations

on the story - changing characters, plot points, and relationships to suit his needs.” Major details of the investigation, circumstances of the characters, and emotional climaxes are eliminated. In their place, less complex elements are written in. Rather than exploring the novel’s complicated romantic affair between the protagonist and his long-time friend and editor, Erika Berger, Oplev’s film eschews the matter altogether. Instead of examining historical documents and delving into the scandalous saga of the missing girl’s family, Oplev’s characters traipse across Sweden, chasing a vague trail of clues. Overall, modifications such as these transform the story from an eerie, yet eloquent thriller to a rather undistinguished murder mystery.

As the essay progresses, Kate also utilizes point by point development. For example, in the passage below she reflects her analysis of a second criterion: the character development in each film.

Second only to its elaborate plot, The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo’s captivating characters greatly contribute to the story’s intrigue. The heroine is an exceptionally slender and fair-skinned, tattooed and pierced young computer-hacking prodigy named Lisbeth Salander. Salander is an enigma of sorts – nearly entirely withdrawn from society with violent tendencies, yet brimming with talent and an intelligent sense of humor. In David Fincher’s adaptation, she is portrayed by the American actress, Rooney Mara. Mara embodies Salander’s appearance flawlessly and “captures her volatile and fascinating essence beautifully” (Scott). However, she does not properly depict the fondness that Salander develops for the male protagonist, Blomkvist, as their relationship grows both professionally and romantically. Rather than developing a friendship with Blomkvist that suddenly turns to sexual attraction, as the original novel describes, Fincher’s Salander simply climbs into bed with Blomkvist. The Swedish film version of Salander, played by actress Noomi Rapace, more accurately portrays the character’s feelings of growing affection. She shares details of her shadowy past with Blomkvist and allows him into her secretive world of digital espionage. Los Angeles Times film critic Kenneth Turan describes this display of care as enabling the audience to “connect on screen in the way readers do on the page.” It is with this emotional connection that the Swedish adaptation takes the advantage.

As her essay moves toward its conclusion, Kate once again refers to the criteria she used to make her judgment and affirm the value she has found in the film she believes is superior.

Storyline and character portrayal aside, entertainment value significantly distinguishes the American adaptation from the Swedish. The Swedish film is poorly crafted and gives the impression of being “the very long pilot episode of a television crime show” (Scott). Packed with edgy cinematography, vibrant locations, and high

profile actors, the American version of the film is “sleeker, smoother, and sexier than its Swedish predecessor,” as described by Peter Bradshaw, a critic for The Guardian. Director David Fincher’s “gift for disturbing, twist-the-knife cinema” is apparent in this impressively chilling film (Turan). Because of this, the American adaptation is far superior when accounting for entertainment value.

Though it falls short of truly embodying the story’s characters, the American version of The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo ultimately outshines its Swedish counterpart. By embracing the novel’s original storyline and bringing it to the screen in a sophisticated and entertaining fashion, the American film proves to be a genuinely remarkable adaptation.

When students submit the final copy of this three to four page essay, their instructors expect to find the following components, exhibited in Kate’s essay above:

- An engaging introduction that identifies the two subjects being compared—products, films, websites—and, for example, the reason for evaluation.
- A thesis that communicates the “better” product, film, website, etc. based on the evaluation process.
- Point by point or block by block paragraph development explaining how well each subject meets the standards
- Evidence from reputable sources, surveys, and expert testimony that support and confirm the writer’s thesis.
- Compliance with MLA or APA standards for documentation