

Directions:

1. Mark your confusion.
2. Show evidence of a close reading. Mark up the text with questions and/or comments.
3. Write a one-page reflection on your own sheet of paper.

Oscar Night: How Are the Winners Picked?

The world's biggest awards ceremony, unfolding this year on Feb. 26, has a history of playing it safe.

Source: The Week/ February 17, 2012,

When did the Oscars begin?

The first Academy Awards ceremony was held in May 1929, over dinner at Hollywood's Roosevelt Hotel. It was attended by 270 people, including some who paid a \$5 fee as guests of those with invitations, and was hosted by silent-movie actor Douglas Fairbanks, who handed out the awards in just a few minutes. The 15 winners had been disclosed three months earlier, and the very first Oscar — a 13-inch-tall gold-plated statuette designed by MGM's art director, Cedric Gibbons — had already been presented to German actor Emil Jannings, who had sailed to Europe a few weeks before. The silent-movie star was actually the runner-up in the leading-actor category. Celebrity dog Rin Tin Tin had picked up more votes, but was denied the award by an embarrassed academy.

How did the Oscar get its name?

Legend has it that a librarian at the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, which awards the prizes, took a peek at a statuette and said, "Gee! He looks just like my Uncle Oscar." The name stuck, and so did the "Little Man," which remains the single most prized award in the movie business. And this year's 84th Oscar ceremony will be much like the previous 83, with studio bosses, actors, directors, sound editors, and makeup artists doing their utmost to be called up on stage. Their fate rests on the votes of the Academy's members, whose numbers have climbed from 36 in 1927 to 5,783 today.

How do you become a member?

You're either invited to join after being nominated for an Oscar, or you're elected by at least two other members for your services to the film industry. Members join for life, making the Academy a large and unwieldy band: Among those in this select club are anonymous insiders, major Hollywood players like Steven Spielberg, and the occasional outlier, like Mother Dolores Hart, a 73-year-old Benedictine nun who appeared opposite Elvis Presley in 1957's *Loving You*.

How does the Academy vote?

It has used the same Byzantine voting system since 1936. In stage one — choosing the nominees — members of the Academy's 15 branches vote in their own fields. So directors vote for Best Director, cinematographers for Best Cinematography, and so on, with each voter naming five choices in order of preference. (Everyone gets to nominate for Best Picture). Using a complex system to weight the votes, auditing firm PricewaterhouseCoopers then tabulates the results and determines the top five nominees in each category — or the top nine, in the case of Best Picture. Stage two — choosing the winner — is simpler. All members are allowed to vote in each category, and the nominee with the most ballots wins the statuette.

What's wrong with the system?

Not only is it confusing even to the members of the Academy, it produces some very puzzling results. The movie industry's most prestigious honor somehow managed to elude Orson Welles, Alfred Hitchcock, Richard Burton, Cary Grant, and Greta Garbo. Academy voters chose *How Green Was My Valley* over *Citizen Kane* in 1942, and *Rocky* ahead of *Taxi Driver* in 1977. Critics of the Oscars say the Academy's voters routinely discriminate against certain genres — comedies, science fiction, and Westerns — and shrink from any kind of controversy and "brave" filmmaking, instead favoring strong, crowd-pleasing story lines. Popularity, in other words, often trumps art.

How is the system to blame?

The biggest problem is that the average Academy member is 57, white, male, and looking for his next Hollywood project. Only a minority, some 1,500, are actors or directors. The rest are the producers, set builders, visual-effects specialists, sound guys, and PR execs that make the industry tick. They're known as the "steak eaters," because they're mostly red-blooded males, and when it comes to the decisive second round of voting, they are by far the Academy's largest voting bloc. "Call it the steak-eater vote, call it the old-geezer vote, call it the babe vote. They always vote for the babes," says Jeffrey Wells, who runs Hollywood-Elsewhere.com. Steak eaters are not big fans of films with gay or foreign themes, like *Brokeback Mountain* or *Munich*, and in any given year, about 700 of them will be associated with an Oscar-nominated film, quietly lobbying their peers on its behalf.

Does winning matter?

You bet. In crude financial terms, winning an Oscar, or even being nominated, can have a huge effect on a film's success. U.S. ticket sales for *Slumdog Millionaire* jumped more than 200 percent when it was nominated, in 2009. Studies have shown that nominations alone can extend a film's presence in cinemas for weeks. At the real business end of Hollywood, however, Oscars are a bonus but don't massively boost the grosses of box-office smashes. Of the top 50 grossing films of all time, just three have won Best Picture: *Titanic*, *Forrest Gump*, and *Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King*.

How to win an Oscar

When it comes to winning an Academy Award, it pays to be a drama queen. A study by the University of California, Los Angeles, and Harvard University found that performers who appear in a drama rather than a comedy are nine times more likely to be nominated for an award. And actresses are twice as likely to be nominated as their male co-stars. "Because there are fewer female than male performers in films, and both are eligible for the same number of awards, actresses stand a better chance," said sociologist Nicole Esparza. "It's simple arithmetic." Perversely, not showing up at the ceremony — a sure sign that you're an established megastar — can also improve your chances. Marlon Brando didn't pick up his Oscar for *The Godfather* in 1973. Paul Newman turned down an invite in 1987, convinced he wouldn't win on his seventh attempt. And when Woody Allen's *Annie Hall* won Best Picture in 1978, he was already tucked into bed in New York, having unplugged the phone and soothed himself to sleep by reading *Conversations With Carl Jung*.

Reflection ideas:

- Which film should win best picture this year? Why?
- What academy voting rules would you change? Why?
- Discuss your favorite film(s)
- Tell a story about a night at the movies