This course surveys the Western movie’s development from its origins to the present, with a focus on the genre’s “classic” period of the late-1930s to the mid-1960s.

We'll consider a number of key questions, including: How does the Western change over time, and how might we explain those changes? Why would a genre with such a limited setting – the American frontier in the 1870s and 80s – so appeal to moviegoers in the 1940s and 50s? And why did the genre then fall out of favor with audiences in the 1960s and 70s, to the point that today only one or two Westerns are released annually?

Answering these questions requires an exploration of both how the Western developed and how scholars and critics have sought to understand that development. Our investigation will be centered on the viewing of over two-dozen influential Westerns, supplemented by seminal writings in Western and genre criticism.

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