

History Department Assessment Report – Academic Year 2013-2014

Description of assessment process

For the 2013-2014 academic year the History Department assessed two learning outcomes drawn from its overall plan. These were learning objectives one and three. Learning objective one addresses the ability to use conduct original research using primary sources and learning objective three addresses students' ability to create a coherent, original historical narrative based on research and use of evidence. The department selected these two outcomes because the ability to create an original historical argument (outcome three) represents the culminating experience in the history major and serves as the most obvious way to assess students' progress and abilities. Further, the ability to locate and use primary sources to create such an argument (outcome one) is a core aspect of the work of academic historians, and it was felt that this outcome was appropriate to accompany objective three as one is informed by the other.

Two rubrics were created for each of these learning outcomes (please see Figures 1 and 2). The rubric used for learning outcome one analyzed students' ability to do the following in regard to their use of primary sources: find original sources; analyze primary sources effectively; effectively integrate primary sources into a research paper's narrative; use primary sources to make a conclusion rather than relying on secondary sources and previously published materials. The rubric used for learning outcome three assessed students ability to create an original historical argument that flowed logically and coherently from source material and reflected deep knowledge of the topic being addressed through clear writing and proficient use of citations.

The process used to assess these objectives was through blind review of student work by history department faculty members. All history majors must take the course HIS 498: History Capstone; the primary goal of this course is for students to create a historical research paper. The final papers from this course ("capstone papers") were collected at the end of last year and anonymously evaluated by faculty volunteers from the department. Each paper was read and evaluated using the two rubrics discussed above. Last year, the department graduated over 90 students and 40 capstone papers (approximately half the graduates) were analyzed for this project. Of the forty papers analyzed, thirty were "non-honors" and ten were "honors." Honors capstone papers are substantially longer and are generally completed over the course of a school year rather than over a semester. To gain the most comprehensive overview possible, data is presented here in three forms: non-honors students (N=30), honors students (N=10), and both groups together (N=40). Please see Figures 3-8 for data of how individual capstone papers were assessed in each category. Further, figures 9-14 present these data in graph form.

Analysis of findings

Based on the data collected, certain conclusions about history majors' performance become clear. First, the great majority of the department's honors students perform well in both areas, and it is clear these students put considerable effort into their capstone papers. This is seen most clearly in the high levels of performance in areas such as the ability to create a coherent argument that is original and innovative (80% earning exemplary) and high level of knowledge of the topic (70% earning exemplary). Clearly these students are performing exceptionally and are mastering the skills that are embedded in the study of history.

Data suggests that non-honors students also perform well in these areas (as measured in learning outcome 3). For example, the majority of students scored at levels of adequate or exemplary in all areas of the rubric assessing learning outcome 3 (see Figure 2). For example, 83% of students scored at adequate or above on the rubric category assessing the ability to create an original historical conclusion, 83% of students scored a proficient or above on the category assessing knowledge of the topic in question, and 90% of students scored at adequate or above on the category assessing the overall quality of the paper. This means that the great majority of history majors are able to create well-written, coherent historical narratives that represent innovative and original approaches to the topics being studied. On the rubric for learning objective three, students scored lowest on the category assessing originality (64% at adequate or above), a fact that informs data collected from the rubric assessing learning objective one (see Figure 1).

The data drawn from the various categories found on the rubric that assesses learning objective indicate that students are not performing as ably in this area. Although some students are able to utilize primary sources effectively, overall it is clear that this is a weakness found in the students' work. For example, data on learning objective one suggests that while students are able in most cases to effectively analyze primary sources and place them in proper historical context (70% and 73% at adequate or above in these areas), many are not able to integrate primary sources effectively into their papers and often base their arguments on previously published materials. Although honors students performed better in these areas, they also tended to score lower overall on the rubric that addresses primary sources. A weakness observed in many of the papers was that while they addressed a wide range of innovative topics, geographic regions, and time periods, (from the Cold War, to Ancient Rome, to the Middle Ages) many of the students relied too much on secondary works and previously published materials. Indeed, the weakest papers that were assessed were mostly syntheses of published materials and not original historical works. Although these percentages are small, they nonetheless point to an issue that the department needs to address moving forward.

Action plan

As a department we are planning to discuss ways to improve our students' ability to locate, analyze, and integrate primary sources into their research papers and historical narratives. We will dedicate time during department meetings to brainstorm ways to bring this skill into lower-level courses, so that students have more practice identifying, locating, and using primary materials before they take the Capstone. We will also discuss ways to expand students' concept of primary sources to include not only traditional written documents but also non-written evidence such as material culture, creative work, and oral testimony. Our foundation course "The Craft of History" focuses on how historians make arguments by having students read a variety of secondary materials and to write a historiographical essay on a topic. Most of our history courses use primary sources as a learning tool, but often students are provided with those materials by the professor. As a department we will come up with strategies to have students find primary sources themselves. We will then develop an assessment that measures progress in this area. The 200-level classes 220 (Early World History and Geography), 230 (Modern World History and Geography), and 260 (Themes in American History) are the ideal courses to integrate learning exercises that ask students to locate primary materials. In addition, all 300-level classes include a short research paper as a graded assessment, and these assignments should also require students to locate and integrate primary sources.

Figure 1. Learning Objective 1 – Primary Sources

	Exemplary	Adequate	Minimal	Attempted
Variety of primary sources	Paper uses a variety of primary sources and considerable effort was made to assemble diverse source material	Paper reflects acceptable use of a diverse array of primary materials	Paper uses some primary sources but more effort is needed in this area	Paper does not use enough original sources material in constructing its argument
Historical context of sources	Paper effectively relates primary sources to the specific historical context in which they were written	Paper places primary sources in adequate historical context	Paper reflects some ability to place historical sources in proper context	Paper does not reflect much understanding of the historical period in which the primary documents were written
Analysis of primary sources	Offers accurate analysis and interpretation, distinguishes between fact and opinion, compares and contrasts author's (or authors') point of view	Offers accurate analysis and interpretation of the sources used in the paper.	Demonstrates a minimal understanding the sources with limited interpretation and analysis	Paper does not offer valid analysis or interpretation
Integration of primary sources	Primary sources are referenced throughout the paper and quotes are used appropriately and proficiently	Primary sources are referenced at various points in the paper and some quotes are used appropriately	There is some effort to reference primary sources in the paper	Primary sources are not referenced or quoted effectively in the paper
Conclusions based on evidence	Conclusions made in the paper are based on accurate and innovative interpretations of primary sources.	Primary source evidence was used to support most conclusions found in the paper.	Paper contains limited reference to primary source material.	Interpretations based on evidence are inadequate and/or absent

Figure 2. Learning Objective 3 – Independent Research

	Exemplary	Adequate	Minimal	Attempted
Argument	Paper contains a clear argument that articulates and defends a specific point of view and conclusion.	Paper contains evidence of an argument, but more work is needed in terms of clarity and originality.	An attempt was made to create a historical argument in the paper, but the conclusions made are not strong.	Paper does not contain an identifiable historical argument.
Originality	Paper uses historical sources to create an original and innovative historical conclusion.	Paper contains evidence of originality and innovation, but more effort is needed in this area	Paper relies too much on restating sources and what is already known.	Paper does not reflect originality or innovation.
Logic and Argumentation	All ideas flow logically; the argument is identifiable and reasonable. Author anticipates and successfully defuses counter-arguments; makes novel connections which illuminate the paper's thesis.	Argument is clear and usually flows logically and makes sense. Some evidence that counter-arguments acknowledged. Occasional insightful connections to evidence are made.	Logic may often fail, or the argument may often be unclear. May not address counter-arguments or make any connections with the thesis. May also contain logical contradictions.	Ideas do not flow at all, usually because there is no argument to support. Simplistic view of topic, and there is no effort to grasp possible alternative views. Little attempt to relate evidence to argument
Knowledge of paper topic	Use of primary and secondary sources indicates strong knowledge of the content and familiarity with the historiography related to the topic of the paper. Diverse array of sources are used.	Paper reflects familiarity and some expertise with the content and historiography related to the paper topic.	Paper reflects minimal knowledge of the topic, and not enough sources were consulted or cited.	Paper reflects weak knowledge of the topic and no familiarity with relevant sources
Citations	Paper uses citations correctly and there are minimal errors in this area Footnoted comments are used properly and effectively.	Generally good work in this area, although paper contains some errors in form and style.	Some effective use of footnotes, but there are numerous errors and a lack of proper form.	Footnotes and citations are sloppy and disorganized, and the paper reflects a lack of familiarity with how footnotes are used in historical writing.
Overall impression	The paper directly addresses an important question or issue, and adds new insight to the subject not provided in other secondary sources. The author is able to synthesize knowledge in new and original ways.	The paper competently addresses main question or issue, but does not add much new insight into the subject.	The paper attempts to address main question or issue, but fails.	The paper does not address a main question or issue and does not provide original or insightful conclusions.

Figure 3. Aggregated data for learning objective 1 – Primary sources (non-honors N=30)					
Category	Exemplary	Adequate	Minimal	Attempted	Mean
Variety of primary sources	6 (20%)	9 (30%)	10 (33%)	5 (17%)	2.53
Historical context of sources	8 (27%)	13 (43%)	8 (27%)	1 (3%)	2.93
Analysis of primary sources	6 (20%)	16 (53%)	6 (20%)	2 (6%)	2.87
Integration of primary sources	8 (27%)	8 (27%)	8 (27%)	6 (20%)	2.7
Conclusions based on evidence	8 (27%)	8 (27%)	11 (37%)	3 (10%)	2.7

Figure 4. Aggregated data for learning objective 3 – Independent research (non-honors N=30)					
Category	Exemplary	Adequate	Minimal	Attempted	Mean
Argument	13 (43%)	12 (40%)	4 (13%)	1 (3%)	3.2
Originality	8 (27%)	11 (37%)	10 (33%)	1 (3%)	2.87
Logic and Argumentation	8 (27%)	13 (45%)	8 (27%)	1 (3%)	2.93
Knowledge of paper topic	9 (30%)	16 (53%)	4 (13%)	1 (3%)	3.1
Citations	9 (30%)	13 (45%)	7 (23%)	1 (3%)	3
Overall impression	9 (30%)	18 (60%)	2 (7%)	1 (3%)	3.16

Figure 5. Aggregated data for learning objective 1 – Primary sources (honors N=10)					
Category	Exemplary	Adequate	Minimal	Attempted	Mean
Variety of primary sources	7 (70%)	2 (20%)	1 (10%)		3.6
Historical context of sources	5 (50%)	4 (40%)	1 (10%)		3.5
Analysis of primary sources	5 (50%)	5 (50%)			3.5
Integration of primary sources	5 (50%)	4 (40%)	1 (10%)		3.4
Conclusions based on evidence	6 (60%)	3 (30%)	1 (10%)		3.5

Figure 6. Aggregated data for learning objective 3 – Independent Research (honors N=10)					
Category	Exemplary	Adequate	Minimal	Attempted	Mean
Argument	8 (80%)	1 (10%)	1 (10%)		3.7
Originality	7 (70%)	2 (20%)	1 (10%)		3.6
Logic and Argumentation	7 (70%)	2 (20%)	1 (10%)		3.6
Knowledge of paper topic	7 (70%)	3 (30%)			3.7
Citations	6 (60%)	3 (30%)	1 (10%)		3.5
Overall impression	6 (60%)	4 (40%)			3.6

Figure 7. Aggregated data for learning objective 1 – Primary sources (all N=40)					
Category	Exemplary	Adequate	Minimal	Attempted	Mean
Variety of primary sources	13 (33%)	11 (28%)	11 (28%)	5 (13%)	2.8
Historical context of sources	13 (33%)	17 (43%)	9 (23%)	1 (3%)	2.08
Analysis of primary sources	11 (28%)	21 (53%)	6 (15%)	2 (5%)	3.03
Integration of primary sources	13 (33%)	12 (30%)	9 (23%)	6 (15%)	2.8
Conclusions based on evidence	14 (35%)	11 (28%)	12 (30%)	3 (8%)	2.9

Figure 8. Aggregated data for learning objective 3 – Independent Research (all N=40)					
Category	Exemplary	Adequate	Minimal	Attempted	Mean
Argument	21 (53%)	13 (33%)	5 (13%)	1 (3%)	3.35
Originality	15 (38%)	13 (33%)	11 (28%)	1 (3%)	3.05
Logic and Argumentation	15 (38%)	15 (38%)	9 (23%)	1 (3%)	3.1
Knowledge of paper topic	16 (40%)	19 (48%)	4 (10%)	1 (3%)	3.25
Citations	15 (38%)	16 (40%)	8 (20%)	1 (3%)	3.13
Overall impression	15 (38%)	22 (55%)	2 (3%)	1 (3%)	3.28

Figure 9. Learning objective 1 – Primary sources (non-honors N=30)

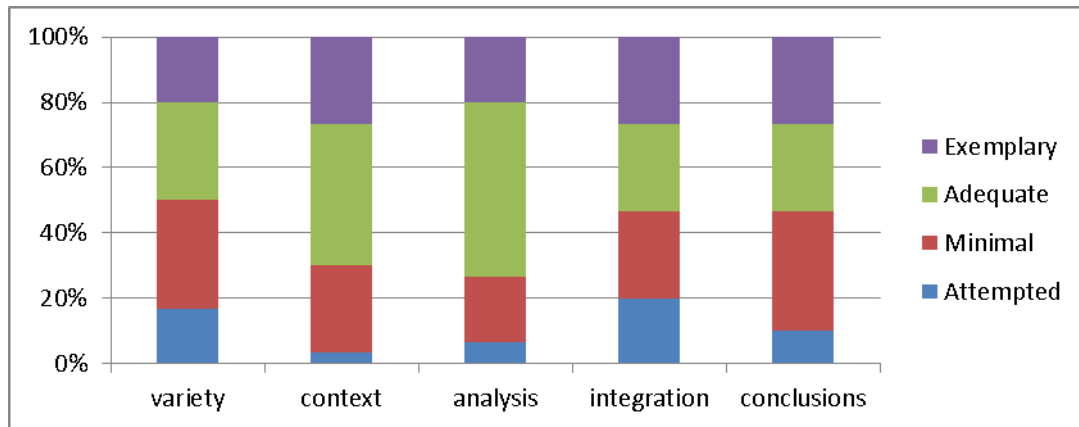


Figure 10. Learning objective 3 – Independent research (non-honors n=30)

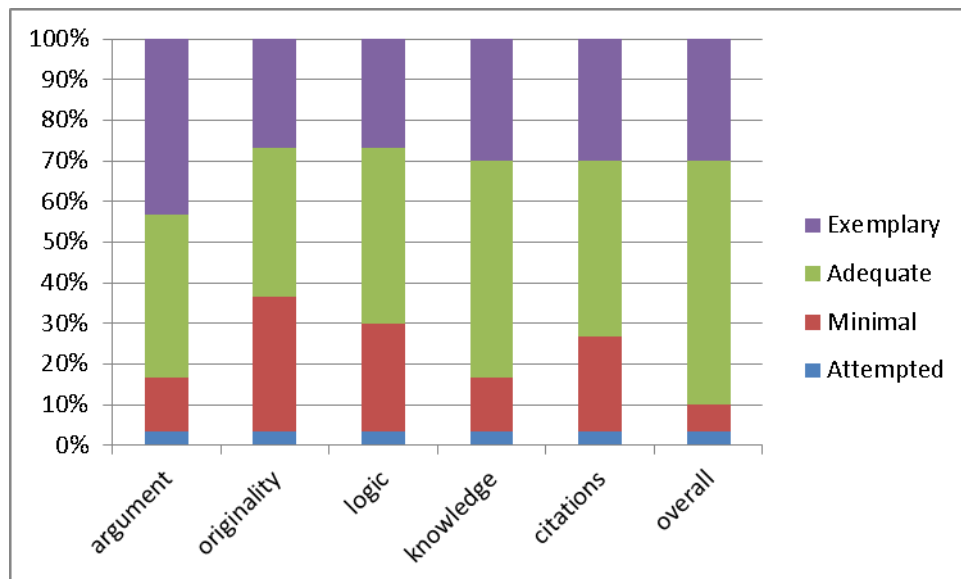


Figure 11. Learning objective 1 – Primary sources (honors N=10)

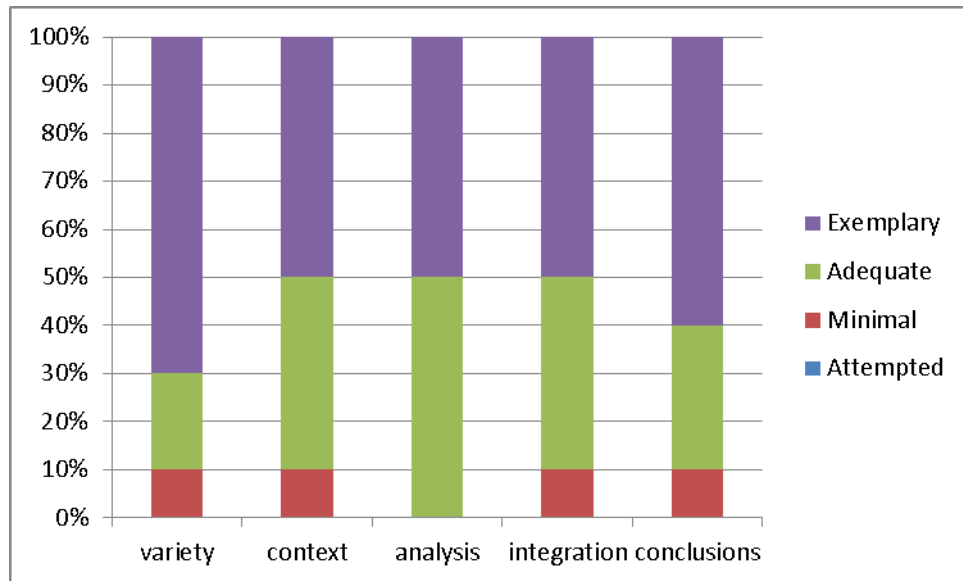


Figure 12. Learning objective 3 – Independent research (honors N=10)

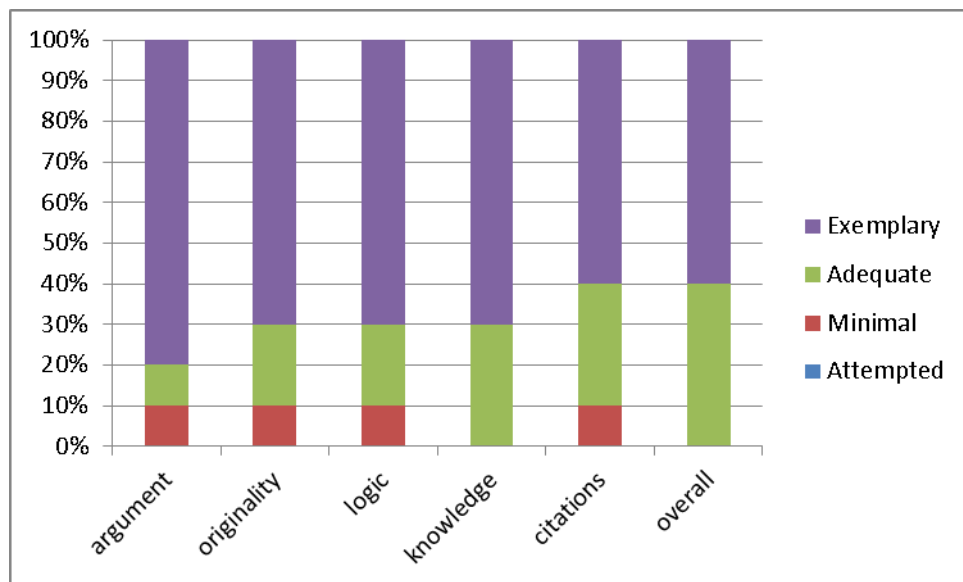


Figure 13. Learning objective 1 – Primary sources (all N=40)

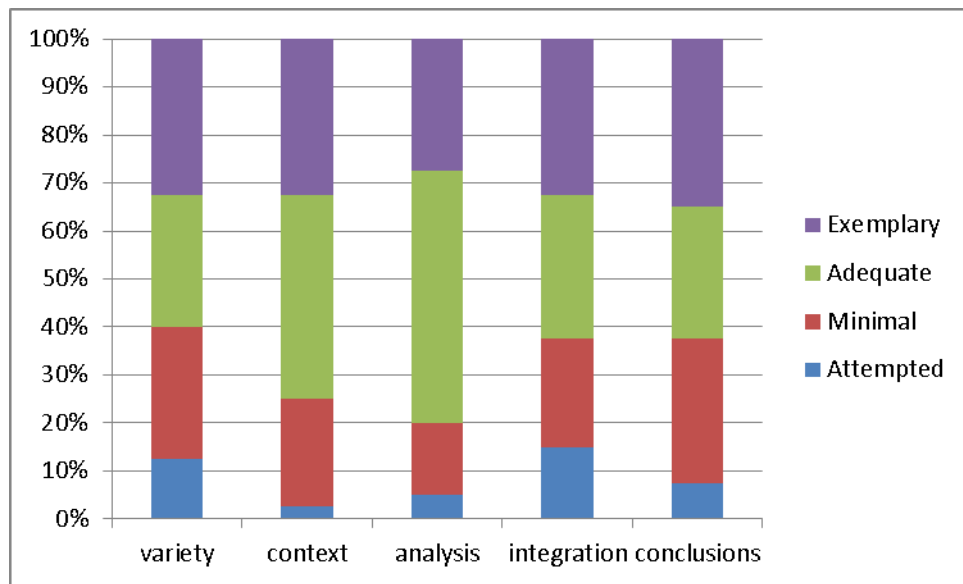


Figure 14. Learning objective 3 – Independent research (all N=40)

