

Assessment Report

History 390, Winter 2014

J. William T. Youngs

History 390, "The Historian as Detective," is designed to help students prepare for their senior capstone papers. Here is the catalogue description of the course:

"This seminar is designed to help advanced history students develop the skills needed to conduct primary-source research and write successful papers. This course prepares students for work in other advanced history courses, in the history capstone course, writing papers for academic conferences and for graduate study in history and related fields."

-- NOTE: for my own course syllabus in History 390, Winter 2014, see appendix below.

My assessment comes from two sources: (1) my own observations of student accomplishments based on my role as professor and grader, and (2) student feedback in answer to a questionnaire asking them to assess their own progress.

(1) Professor's measuring of student progress.

I designed the class around three separate research and writing projects, using each to teach students to identify a topic, find sources, and write a short paper (5-10) pages on the subject. Obviously with three separate papers the students could not go into the kind of depth that will be required of them in their History 490 Capstone paper. But the three-short-paper approach allowed me to teach skills that the students and I honed through each of the three assignments

Note: I also used the three-paper approach in 2013, with about equal time for each. This year I devoted the final five weeks of the class to the third paper, allowing students more time to build upon the skills they learned with the first two. I think that this was a good approach to help the students transition to History 490 where they spend an entire quarter on their papers. I plan to use this approach again in the future.

Assessment: Students improved greatly through each phase of their work, until on the final paper, all students in the class earned grades of 3.0 or better, with most scoring 3.5 or better.

(2) Student self-assessment reflected on 2014 student evaluation form. (Numerical "grade" for "Instructor's Overall Contribution to the course was 4.67 out of 5.)

A. Though the class was very constructive and really improved my writing, especially my citations. I wish we had done more on citations.

- B. Always fun to be in Prof Youngs class. You learn so much; yet you don't realize it till later.
- C. make class shorter
- D. Great use of examples learned a lot about my writing. Thank you Dr. Youngs
- E. I really liked this course! The topics seemed a little difficult to write at first (Erie Canal was the hardest) but I learned a lot about writing! Very Prepared for 490.
- F. Great class! Great discussion, content, instruction, and coursework!
- G. Awesome guy! I love that the overall grade is based off paper writing.

These were my student comments on the class for 2014 on the university evaluation forms. I am appending to these a more lengthy report from 2013 where students answered questions specifically on various facets of the course. I plan to ask these questions again next year of my students, using these as a reference point.

GOAL FOR 2015: In the mean time, I have taken note of one critique from above, and I will revise my approach accordingly. The comment in is the first where they student felt that I could have offered more instruction on citations. I do cover the topic, but I plan in the future to do so more explicitly and extensively.

Baseline assessment: 2013

Student self-assessment in answer to a form with three questions, as indicated below, with sample (representative) answers to follow

Assessment: Note that these questions were not intended for a popularity contest (as in "Did you like this class?"), but instead were designed to determine whether students were focused on the main goals of the class and had developed confidence in achieving those objectives. The results, excerpted below, show a high degree of student engagement and progress.

a) What are the most important lessons about writing a good history paper you have learned in History 390 this quarter?

-- "Edit – having someone else look at my paper first to at least assure [that] it's understandable. Research – to let my research guide my topic and my topic the research."

-- "Feedback has helped me the most because it helps in organizing as well as with sources. Most of all, it gives you a feel for what other people think of your writing and whether it's good or bad. [Also] it really helps to know where good sources can be found."

--“I have learned a great deal of quality information that has improved my writing. Little tips here and there about resource findings and how to connect my topic to my research. The most important lesson I suppose is the note-taking period of the paper not focusing on placement but instead focusing on important information that will contribute to my paper.

--“Having a good amount of sources. I learned through my drafts that when I didn’t have adequate sources that my writing eventually suffered.”

-- “Use a wide variety of sources. Make certain the paper flows smoothly and keeps the reader engaged. It helps to find interesting or obscure information about your topic.”

--“Annotated bibs take a long time, but save you a tremendous amount of time in the end. [I also learned about] the real differences between the three types of sources, and proper footnote style.”

-- “A proposed problem must be thoroughly addressed from multiple angles. I also learned how to dig deeper and more creatively in finding sources. Flexibility and focus are also key in the development of the paper.”

-- “One of the most important lessons I’ve learned is that writing the actual paper is more of a work in progress. Also, I’ve learned that extensive research is absolutely necessary for writing the paper, especially in regards to finding primary sources.”

b) In what ways has this course increased your confidence looking forward to taking your capstone seminar next year?”

-- “The course has increased my confidence by teaching me to take the essay in progressive steps. Plus, the course showed me I have the writing skills needed for writing my capstone.”

-- “It helped me a lot in looking for primary sources and how to do proper footnoting.”

-- “I’m taking 490 now. Throughout the course I’ve used information I’ve learned in this course to help in 490. I feel I’ve learned to research better. I also found it helpful to look at a new topic broadly at first. This technique helped me choose a better topic in 490.”

(NOTE: Students in history are normally required to take History 390 before taking history 490. In some cases we make exceptions to facilitate student needs. I was interested to learn that in this case and in one other case where a student took both courses simultaneously, the students felt that they were able to apply lessons from 390 immediately in their work on 490.)

-- “It has increased my confidence to write three papers in one class. I believe the more writing you do, the better it will hopefully get. I especially liked being able to write on a topic all my choice concerning the history of disease. Because it is a topic I picked, it was interesting and I learned a lot from it.”

- “This course has taught me that there are a lot of questions that could be answered in a topic: being able to center a topic and asking the right and direct questions.”
- “I have become more efficient in looking for sources. I feel like my writing ability has stayed relatively the same, but that with better sources my writing is more clear.”
- “I am actually taking it [History 490] right now, but it [History 390] has helped me in practicing writing good papers. I am using techniques I learned in here on my paper.” (See the NOTE that is four paragraphs above on taking Histories 390 and 490 simultaneously.)
- “I feel like I am a more organized write. Before I was just jumping into the paper, which caused me to have to write multiple drafts (like 10) Now I start out with key terms timeline, then write an outline, then write my first of few drafts.”
- “I am more confident in knowing where to look for adequate sources and my ability to explore various angles to a topic. I am better with organization and pacing myself in the development of the project.”

C. Other observations:

- “The class was really helpful in writing progress.”
- “I enjoyed this class. I found it informative and helpful.”
- “The topics we covered were interesting – the *Amistad*, Erie Canal, and disease. They all were a good choice to explore in this class.”
- “I liked having many drafts because it helped me know where my papers needed to be strengthened.”
- “Overall, the experience of doing the variety of research projects has expanded my knowledge base and made me more comfortable with tackling a significant research endeavor.”

Appendix: Course Requirements

Course Syllabus

History 390

Winter 2014

J. William T. Youngs

The Historian as Detective

You have arrived!

You are on the brink of completing your history B.A. with a senior capstone paper.

But where do you start? How do you gain the research and writing tools to help you write an interesting, persuasive, and original senior essay in History 490?

History 390 is designed to give you those mental tools. In particular, you will learn to do the following:

Surround a subject: gain command of the key persons, events, dates, images, concepts, contexts, and bibliography associated with a particular topic.

Choose within that subject the special topic on which you will focus your work.

Develop your approach to the topic, including writing a set of questions you will ask in working your way into the subject.

Write an outline to help you refine your work on the topic.

Identify the key primary and secondary sources associated with the topic, and then develop an annotated bibliography from those sources.

Write the paper, section by section, continually refining your outline and approach as you lead and are led by your sources.

Revise the paper itself regularly with an eye toward developing a good writing style.

During the quarter we will develop these skills by exploring three different topics in history, using as our starting point three different “prompts.”

Weeks One through Three: Topic – The Poston Massacre, Prompt - the film *John Adams*

Weeks Four through Six: Topic - The Erie Canal, Prompt - Daniel Walker Howe, *What God Hath Wrought*

Weeks Six through Eleven: Topic - The History of Disease, Prompt - Arlo Karlen, *Man and Microbes*

We will meet weekly from 12:00 to 4:50 on Wednesdays.

This is a seminar class, and so attendance at each meeting is required for full credit in the class.

Your grading will be based on class participation, on weekly assignments, and on a final project due at the end of the quarter.

Criteria for Good History 390 Papers

- Topic is clearly stated and is “present and accounted for” throughout the essay. Essay does not “wander” aimlessly from one topic to another.
- Your title is carefully crafted, indicating in an interesting way what your paper is about.
- The various sections of the paper (“clusters”) are coherent, bringing like ideas and information together, and each section is clearly related to the main topic of the paper. The paper flows logically from one section to another, using good transitions to move from section to section.
- You indicate carefully important contextual information in your paper, as in: “this is an example of” or “in other similar circumstances the outcome was somewhat different.”
- Your approach is balanced. It is not a “hatchet job” on a particular facet of American history.
- The information you provide is accurate.
- Your paper makes an original point and/or it provides original information.
- You indicate the significance of your paper, why your topic and your conclusions matter.
- The points are made with good “sign posting” so that the reader knows what you are trying to say at any given point.
- The points are backed up with ample evidence in the form of details and quotations.
- All in all, your paper is written in a way that is both interesting and thoughtful.
- Your information is carefully footnoted, following the rules indicated in Turabian.
- You have researched your paper carefully, bringing together appropriate primary and secondary sources to make your points.
- Fundamental rules of grammar are applied throughout. This includes using paragraphs effectively, avoiding sentence errors and dangling modifiers, and applying punctuation correctly.
- Your bibliography lists primary and secondary sources, following Turabian in style, and including an annotation for each source, even newspaper articles.
- You include a supplemental appendix indicating what “finding aids” you used to construct your paper and indicating how each helped.