

Primary Source Assessment Exercise

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We wanted to know how well seniors in our major were able to interpret primary sources. We were interested because the ability to handle primary sources well is one of the foundational skills for history majors and also because we see skills in this area as a proxy for critical thinking in general.

Students receive detailed instruction in how to interpret primary sources in HIS1. Some upper-division classes also require significant work with the primary sources. By the time students make it to HIS198, we hope that they will be competent in this area.

Method

In mid-November, Dr. Mallampalli asked each of his HIS198 students to bring to class a primary source related to their topic. He gave them an hour to analyze the source and write up their findings. Drs. Mallampalli and Chapman assessed these source analyses using a rubric prepared by Dr. Robins. We were looking for two things: did students instinctively use the appropriate categories of analysis (e.g. genre, author), and how well did they analyze the source?

We deliberately did not prime students by telling them the categories we were looking for, wanting to know what questions they would ask of their own accord. In other words, we wanted to see whether they had developed good habits of examining primary documents.

Findings

We assessed the work of eleven students. The results are below.

	Superior Analysis	Good Analysis	Needs Help Analysis	Really Needy Analysis
Author	1	4	3	3
Audience	1	1	4	5
Genre	1	1	3	6
Content	2	3	4	0
Context	0	7	4	0
Integration into Paper	1	8	2	0

Analysis

We were rather disappointed with the results. One of our aims in HIS1 Introduction to History is to help students develop certain reflexes when presented with a primary source, i.e. they will know to ask questions about genre, author, audience etc. That the students did not do this is a concern, as we feel these are basic historical skills that reflect important critical thinking abilities. We were not surprised that some students struggled to analyze their documents well, but we would have liked to see fewer students in the two right-hand columns.

Changes

Discussion focused on what can be done in upper-division courses to reinforce what students learned in HIS1. Primary source assessment is already a central feature in several such courses, and two faculty spoke of recent, significant increases in the amount of primary source analysis required in one of their courses (HIS140 and HIS173). In addition, Rick Pointer spoke of increased emphasis on primary sources in HIS7 and HIS8. So there are reasons to hope that the next batch of seniors will have a firmer grasp on this skill than this year's crop.

Looking forward, we discussed:

- Making the criteria for effective primary source analysis more explicit in pertinent assignments.
- Examining a wider range of genres in HIS1.
- Making available HIS1 handouts on source analysis to the rest of the department.

Concluding Thought

Each year, the history department selects the best papers from HIS198 to decide who gets the Wilt Prize in historical scholarship. This year, we therefore each read the same five papers. Ironically, we were especially impressed this year by the excellent job that students had done incorporating primary sources into their work. So all is not lost! Nevertheless, we would like to see a greater number of our students graduating with strong abilities in the handling of primary sources.