

History Working Group on General Education courses September notes

Topic: Objectives

Homework: Study the Humanities and Social Science GE criteria, History assessment plan and 2006-7 report, and sample objectives from History courses.

Goal: Consensus about objectives for lower-level History courses that provide an introduction to the Humanities or Social Sciences and prepare majors for upper-level History courses.

I. Who needs objectives?

A. Instructors

All of us have multiple objectives in mind in the courses we teach. By spelling them out, we can clarify our own thinking and construct more transparent syllabuses, in which the parts have a specific purpose and constitute a coherent whole. Lectures, readings, discussions, assignments, papers, and exams = means for accomplishing the objectives.

B. Students

Many students think the study of history = rote learning. We should make them understand why and how we expect them to get something more than content knowledge out of our courses: mental habits that will be useful in college and beyond. Explain the objectives stated in the syllabus and refer to them throughout the semester. Use them as rubrics for the evaluation of assignments. Ask students to complete a questionnaire about implementation of objectives and self-evaluation about their involvement in the learning process.

C. Department Our courses are not parcels of private property fenced off from each other. They are part of the University, College, and Department curriculums. Courses that carry GE credit should do what GE courses are supposed to do. The APCC requires CAR forms for GE courses to include information about objectives and assessment and will require such information about all of our GE courses in the next review of the undergraduate program. Lower-level courses should prepare students for upper-level courses. Our students need to learn the skills they need for the senior research seminar before they take it. Through History 600 we assess not only the performance of our majors but also the preparation we give them. Consensus about the objectives of lower-level (and upper-level) courses will be useful for all instructors, especially lecturers and new faculty members.

II. Can we agree on some objectives for lower-level (including GE) History courses?

A. Generally,

1. Mastery of subject matter, defined chronologically, geographically, and/or thematically, in most but not all cases more broadly than in upper-level courses. Different instructors have different expectations and need to explain what students should be able to do.
2. Awareness of the complexity and diversity of human experience and of general historical issues such as context, causes and consequences, change and continuity, identity and culture (race, class, gender, ethnicity, religion).
3. Recognition of assumptions, concepts, models, and various methods in historical work and in our own thinking about the past.
4. Consideration of connections between past and present, recognition of the use and abuse of history.

B. More specifically (and measurably), students will acquire or enhance and demonstrate their ability to:

1. Understand history not only as a product (what to know) but also as a process (how to think) that involves asking questions and solving problems, collecting and selecting evidence, constructing arguments and formulating conclusions, evaluating multiple interpretations.
2. Read primary and secondary sources critically.
3. Use evidence to make a point.
4. Write descriptively and analytically, literately and cogently, using University of Chicago style for foot/endnotes and bibliography.

III. What sort of strategies and manageable (for instructors as well as students) assignments might be used to assess the extent to which students meet objectives?

Have students

- read a page from another textbook, alongside the assigned textbook, to make the point that there are always multiple versions
- identify and evaluate the arguments in two conflicting accounts
 - read a primary source used in a secondary source and analyze the way it is used
- use a set of primary sources to construct an account
- do a practice exercise before the graded one
- do a series of exercises involving progressively more complex tasks
- rewrite
- write in a different voice, e.g. in that of a historian whose work they have read
- read good and bad examples of the type of work they are required to do
- submit analytical questions for discussion