

HIST 118 Learning Rubric

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The main objective of this rubric is to provide you with targets for your own learning in this course. As you read the descriptions of each historical skill, think about whether they would be fitting descriptions of your own work and, if not, about what steps you could take to improve the fit.*

Because learning is a process, be aware that you might slide backwards as well as move forwards; that is, having seemed to grasp a concept at a certain point in the semester, your later work might reveal to you and to me that your grasp was not yet firm. Throughout this rubric, mastery of a skill refers, by definition, to sustained competence, so do not relax your efforts to learn and improve as soon as you decide (or hear from me) that you are showing signs of mastery.

While I intend these descriptions primarily as a help to you, I will also use them when assessing your progress towards mastery of the five skills. In that sense, the rubric will also determine your course grade, which is calculated according to the number of skills you have mastered by the end of the semester. Please note, therefore, that in order for me to say that you have mastered a skill described below you must, at a minimum, complete all of the weekly writing assignments that I give you in this course.

1. Narrativity

Craft complex historical narratives that answer a question or solve a problem using sophisticated understandings of causation, continuity, and change over time.

Emerging practice: Narratives written by new historians are often simple, sequential accounts that tell readers “what happened” without indicating why the narrative matters. To beginners, one way of telling the story is as good as any other. It is difficult to tell why certain things are included and others are not; obviously relevant issues are ignored, while tangential issues are included. Attempts to tie events together as cause and effect, or as evidence of change or continuity, are weak, simplistic, logically fallacious, or non-existent.

As you begin to *develop competence*, you will start crafting narratives that are oriented towards solving a problem or answering a question, though the stakes of the problem or question may be unclear and the answer attempted by the narrative may not yet be fully convincing. You’ll begin to incorporate a wide range of relevant people, places, events, etc., but your criteria about what to include or

* Parts of this rubric, especially the points on style and self-reflection, are directly indebted to Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe, *Understanding by Design*, second edition (Alexandria, Va.: ASCD, 2005).

exclude may still be poor or unevenly applied. Clear chronological markers and claims about causation, change, and continuity will begin to appear, but they may be oversimplified (i.e., monocausal, linear, disproportionately focused on change or continuity, Whig-
 45 gish, all about progress or all about declension). Narratives may be teleological; they have an air of inevitability about them, instead of being qualified by the possibility that things could have happened differently under different circumstances. After specific feedback or coaching, you may demonstrate signs of mastery, but you may have
 50 difficulty assessing the quality of other authors' historical narratives by these same standards.

Achieving *mastery* means demonstrating the ability to write and to recognize narratives that persuasively address a problem or question whose significance is made clear. The stakes of the question and the
 55 difficulty of answering it are made as clear as the answer itself. The range of topics covered will simultaneously indicate discernment (only those things that are most relevant are included), thoroughness (while clearly defined, your standard of relevance is capacious enough to bring a remarkably wide range of issues to bear on the
 60 problem), and awareness of chronology. Claims about causation, change, and continuity are fully warranted and sophisticated. You present causality as a dense web in which multiple overlapping factors played a role, instead of only one or two; elements of change and continuity are treated as contingent, coexistent, and related, with
 65 neither wholly displacing the other. You consistently probe or avoid simplistic narratives of unbroken progress or total decline.

2. Evidence

Thoroughly support and revise your claims about the past using critical approaches to the best and most relevant available evidence.

70 *Emerging practice:* As a novice historian, you may assume that the number of claims about the past still needing specific, empirical substantiation is relatively small. You will often make claims without giving specific evidence to support them, or you may give evidence that is over-general, under-examined, or not sourced. At this stage,
 75 you may use only a small portion of the evidence available to you from course readings and classes. Evidence is often accepted uncritically by beginners, who show little awareness of source problems or the differences between primary and secondary accounts. Sources are treated as straightforward bearers of information that give unfettered
 80 access to their creators' thinking.

As you begin to *develop competence* in dealing with evidence, you

will make sure that claims needing substantiation with evidence always receive it, though you may still struggle to see when and why already substantiated claims need to be revised or extended by new evidence. Claims are carefully calibrated and limited by available evidence, though some generalizations may still reach beyond what the evidence allows. It's easy for others to tell where you are getting specific evidence from, and that you have engaged with a variety of primary and secondary sources, though you may still rely disproportionately on a few sources. You are also beginning to think critically about evidence. You know to look for information about where evidence came from (*sourcing*) and to weigh evidence against other evidence (*corroboration*). While beginners tend to approach sources like "jurors, patiently listening to testimony and questioning themselves," you are beginning to approach sources like "prosecuting attorneys."* You notice discrepancies between accounts and pose questions about the intentions, audiences, perspectives, and potential blindspots of their creators, though skepticism about a source may sometimes be misplaced or over-zealous. You may begin to demonstrate signs of mastery, but only after specific feedback or coaching.

You'll approach *mastery* in your use of evidence when, as a matter of course, you provide well-sourced, specific evidence to support, revise, and qualify your claims, whether large or small. You think creatively about what evidence is available to you when considering a problem, and you can make effective use of earlier material from the course that may, at first glance, seem unrelated to the topic at hand. You use historical sources not just to substantiate a single claim about that source or its creator, but to reconstruct broader historical and social contexts in which all the available evidence makes more sense (*contextualization*). You also, as a matter of course, ask questions about where the evidence came from and "nurse doubt" about its reliability or limits.[†] Yet you are also able to use a source's problems not just to discount its reliability, but to reason from those problems to new claims or insights. You are alternately the "prosecutor" and the "defense attorney" for sources, and ultimately reach wise judgments; balancing skepticism with belief, you come to persuasive conclusions about the most probable explanation for a given body of evidence.

* The juror versus attorney metaphor comes from Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 77.

[†] The phrase "nurse doubt" comes from the final episode of the popular Serial podcast, which was also, according to historian Eric Rauchway, a "pretty good dramatization of the historical process." See <http://bit.ly/1xZRvXK>.

3. Empathy

120 *Look for the potential strengths and insights offered by alternative points of view on or in the past, even or especially when they conflict with your own or conventional understandings.*

Empathy is an intellectual and imaginative skill that is required both when reading sources created in the past and when reading secondary sources created by other historians. Though often confused with “sympathy” or “positive feeling,” empathy means being sensitive to context and entertaining even those points of view with which you disagree; it does not require or necessarily imply agreement.

125 A *novice historian* who lacks this skill tends to judge the decisions and ideas of historical actors according to his or her own present-day opinions, which are sometimes conflated in the novice’s mind with “common sense” or “just the way it is.” Beginners are typically not very interested in seeking out multiple perspectives on an issue; they identify the actor or historian whose perspective they most agree with, and then discount or ignore other perspectives. At times, they may not even show awareness that an alternative perspective exists, even when presented with evidence to the contrary. Judgments are typically unjustifiably premature and absolute; even without much consideration, beginners decide a historical person or idea is all good or all bad.

130 As you develop the skill of historical empathy, you will begin to show an awareness that multiple perspectives exist in the past, though you may still be quick to judge different perspectives as unaccountably strange or unacceptable. On the other hand, when you do begin to entertain a historical actor’s perspective as plausible, it may still be based on present-day assumptions about what you or someone you know would do in a similar situation today. When discussing other historians’ or students’ perspectives, you are able to identify differences of opinion and see the strengths and weakness of other views, though you may require coaching or specific feedback in order to be persuaded that a view you dislike has some merit, or that one you like has some problems.

135 *Mastery* of historical empathy is defined by an ability to “see and judge the past on its own terms by trying to understand the mentality, frames of reference, beliefs, values, intentions, and actions of historical agents using a variety of historical evidence.”* Put more simply, empathy means understanding historical actors and ideas in the *context of their times*, which is accessed by the consideration of multiple perspectives and sources from the past. By acknowledging the distance between the present and the past, you are able to make

* This definition is drawn from Kaya Yilmaz, “Historical Empathy and Its Implications for Classroom Practices in Schools,” *The History Teacher* 40, no. 3 (May 2007), 331.

even strange or outdated views comprehensible to contemporary minds. You are not only sensitive to multiple perspectives on an issue that exist in the historical record, but also can imagine relevant perspectives that may not have been included in the record at all.

165 When articulating your own positions about the past, you are able to encompass and account for plausible alternative views while articulating why yours is preferable. Because you can see both the good and the bad in perspectives other than your own, your own conclusions are well-grounded but tentative and your criticisms of others
170 are charitable and constructive.

4. Style

Communicate your ideas clearly and concisely in writing, with an appropriate level of detail and awareness of audience.

Beginning writers may struggle to communicate clearly due to lack
175 of organization, too much or too little detail, failure to consider what the intended audience already knows, or a weak grasp of basic writing conventions pertaining to word choice, grammar, and sentence fluency. Beginners also struggle to find their own voice, relying heavily instead on excessively long quotations from others or poorly
180 sourced paraphrases of someone else's material. Several of these problems often appear together in a piece of writing.

As your command of style develops, however, your writing will be compellingly structured so as to highlight and develop a central idea or theme, with key points stated early or late in the text and/or
185 its constituent parts. Paragraph breaks, signposts, and navigational words (such as "such as," "however," "nonetheless," "moreover," "next," and "in sum") help to move the reader through the text. You will craft your writing with awareness of the audience and the purpose for writing, conveying your points with precise words and
190 fluent sentences that engage the reader's interest. Your writing will show a good grasp of standard writing conventions and grammatical rules, though you may still struggle with one or two recurring grammatical problems. Through revision of your own work, you will minimize repetition, locate typos and run-on sentences, and carefully
195 source quotations from or allusions to other authors.

Masterful style means being able to "pull together" all of these skills with minimal coaching or feedback. A masterful writer has internalized these writing conventions so that errors and unclear passages tend to be very few in submitted assignments. Only a few
200 minor touch-ups would make the text suitable for publication in the appropriate venue.

5. Self-reflection

Show you can think reflexively and critically about your own ongoing development as a student of history.

205 History students without the habit of critical self-reflection tend to judge their own work by two criteria: whether the work was done, and whether significant effort was expended to do it. They show very little interest in their own progress towards the skills outlined above, and they seem unaware of how their own unexamined assumptions, 210 settled convictions, habits of thinking, or gaps in knowledge might present obstacles to that development. Often, students of this sort respond to feedback with defensiveness or redirection; a non-reflexive thinker holds that someone else is *always* to blame for their own failure to understand or persuade.

215 Self-reflective students of history, on the other hand, are constantly questioning their own convictions and thinking in order to sort out warranted beliefs from prejudices. They are aware of and accurately assess the limits of their own knowledge, and they recognize unique styles or beliefs that might unjustifiably color their understanding. 220 They hold their views on the past provisionally, in the sense that they are willing to change their minds when evidence or logic demands it. They are aware that there may be multiple ways to accomplish a task and think hard about which way would be best. Most of all, they can engage in effective “meta-thinking” about their own learning, qualitatively evaluating their own work by the criteria used by historians 225 more generally, such as the criteria described in this rubric.

Evidence for the mastery of this skill is easiest to see when students are asked to evaluate their own learning progress, as you will be in the course. If your responses to such questions show awareness 230 of changes in your own thinking, and you can effectively link those changes to the specific skills we are aiming to develop in the course, you are demonstrating the kind of self-reflection that good historians need. Moreover, even in everyday exchanges with me and your peers, you show that you regularly reflect on the meaning of what you have 235 learned. Constructive criticism is not only gratefully received, but assimilated and applied, when warranted, in new contexts. In all of these ways, self-reflective students are wise, circumspect, and characterized by intellectual integrity; they take responsibility for their own learning and demonstrate a willingness to develop and use new 240 historical thinking skills.