

GEOC Program Plan for Information Literacy

Major Program: History

Information literacy is at the heart of the undergraduate history program, embedded in the three learning goals that the department has established for the major:

- 1) To promote historical consciousness, helping students escape the limitations of present-mindedness and nostalgia.
- 2) To help students strengthen their skills in written communication, research, and analytical approaches to problem-solving.
- 3) To help students approach the study of history as active producers of knowledge, rather than as passive consumers.

Elements of information literacy are covered in all undergraduate history courses, but are concentrated in the two methodology courses required of all majors: History 211 ("The Historian's Craft") and History 297W (the "Senior Seminar"). These courses provide not only instruction in information literacy, but also exercises that enable instructors to assess the degree to which students have acquired an appropriate level of information literacy competence.

The Foundation of the History Major: History 211, "The Historian's Craft"

History 211, a seminar capped at 20 students, is intended to be taken by sophomores and juniors immediately upon declaration of the major. It is open only to history majors and to history/education students in the Neag School of Education. As stated in the course catalog, the purpose of the course is to help students in "Learning critical reading, thinking and writing skills by interpreting a variety of primary sources."

Though instructors have approached this project in varying ways, they commonly have treated the course as an introduction to -- or "apprenticeship" in -- the historian's methods of producing knowledge out of the raw material of historical evidence.

Given its purpose as an introduction to historical methods, all sections of History 211 are expected to familiarize students with certain basic concepts and technical skills needed to pursue an individual research project. Students in History 211 are not necessarily required to pursue such a project as part of the course, but they should not complete the course without being prepared to begin a research project at some later date.

To reinforce their understanding of history as constructed knowledge, and to prepare them to construct historical knowledge themselves, all students in History 211 are taught certain basic skills in gathering and using information. Each section of the course requires students to

demonstrate information literacy by completing written assignments, developed by the individual instructor, that are **assessed** in part according to the following criteria:

1) An ability to frame a research question that could be answered through the examination of historical evidence (ACLR I).

2) Skills in Locating Appropriate Source Material. These skills include the following:

- An ability to use the Library Catalog (HOMER) to locate library holdings relevant to their text and topic (ACLR II).
- An ability to search the scholarly literature for relevant secondary works. This should include the ability to use research databases (such as *Historical Abstracts* and *America: History and Life*) (ACLR II).
- An ability to locate journal articles in the stacks of the library as well as online (ACLR II).
- An ability to identify different kinds of primary sources pertinent to the student's area of interest (ACLR II).
- An awareness of where beyond the holdings of our library, primary sources might be located (ACLR II).
- An ability to use research databases (such as *Archives USA* and *WorldCat*) in the search for specific primary source material held elsewhere (ACLR II).
- An ability to locate appropriate materials on the Internet, and to evaluate the reliability of information gained in this way (ACLR II).

3) Skills in Processing Information. These skills include the following:

- An ability to distinguish a primary source from a secondary source (ACRL III).
- An ability to discern some of the limitations or biases inherent in a source. Students should recognize that no source can be used as a perfectly transparent window into the past (ACRL III).
- An understanding of the importance and appropriate use of footnotes (ACRL III & V).
- An understanding of what plagiarism is and why it is regarded with disfavor (ACLR III & V).
- An ability to paraphrase without plagiarizing (ACLR III).

The Capstone of the History Major: History 297W, the "Senior Seminar"

All graduating history majors must complete History 297W or an equivalent project in the honors track. History 297W, a seminar capped at 19 students, is specifically designed toward the major's third learning goal: "To help students approach the study of history as active producers of knowledge, rather than as passive consumers." The seminar immerses students in a research experience emphasizing primary sources.

Working within a broad topical framework defined by the instructor in the course title and description, students complete a major research paper on a topic agreed upon in consultation with the instructor. The department offers a constantly changing variety of topics for the 297W sections, but the various sections share a common purpose: “to give students the experience of reading critically and in depth in primary and secondary sources, and of developing and defending a position as an historian does.” Many instructors of History 297W require a single research paper of 15-20 double-spaced pages. Others require a shorter paper of 10-12 pages, typical of an academic conference paper, supplemented by other revised writing assignments.

The History Department bases its assessment of the undergraduate major on students' research projects in History 297W. The department asks each instructor of History 297W to evaluate the success of each student in reaching four learning objectives. Although the phrase "information literacy" appears in only the first of these, all four objectives are essentially concerned with information literacy as described in the GEOC document titled "Faculty Guidelines: Information Literacy Standards for Higher Education, University of Connecticut Undergraduate Curriculum." For this reason, the 297W project provides an essential instrument for assessing acquisition of information literacy skills by our History majors.

Here are the four learning objectives as they appear in the History Major Assessment Plan, with inserted references in brackets to the corresponding ACLR standards:

- 1) The information literacy skills needed to find primary and secondary sources relevant to a research topic of the student's choosing. These skills include the following:
 - a) The ability to use databases to locate appropriate primary source material (ACLR II).
 - b) The ability to use databases to locate scholarly literature on the student's topic of choice. (ACLR II).
 - c) The ability to locate appropriate materials on the Internet, and to evaluate the reliability of information gained in this way (ACLR II).
- 2) The following skills needed to analyze a primary source:
 - a) The ability to read a source as an expression of the author's ideas and values (ACLR III).
 - b) An ability to analyze primary sources for multiplicities of meaning, ambiguity, ambivalence, and points of view (ACLR III).
 - c) An ability to interpret primary sources in their historical contexts (ACLR III).
- 3) The ability to construct an interpretation of the past and to demonstrate its originality (ACLR IV).
- 4) The ability to write coherently in the form of an argument or narrative (ACLR IV).

Though the research project is the major graded component of each section of History 297W, the entire course is devoted to enriching the students' skills in seeking, understanding, synthesizing and evaluating information. At class meetings, instructors provide guidance in research methodologies and lead students in discussions aimed at strengthening their skills in interpreting primary and secondary source material. Instructors typically meet individually with each student

outside of class time to discuss the student's research project. All sections of History 297W require students to revise and resubmit their written work, in keeping with the General Education guidelines for "W" courses. Throughout every component of History 297W, the instructors work to ensure that our graduating seniors have reached an advanced level of information literacy.