

**General Education Assessment Outcome #3:
Critical Thinking, Integration, and Application of Knowledge
Department of History, Philosophy, Political Science and Religion
Assessment of HIST J495 – September 1, 2014**

I. Critical Thinking Rubric – Application to Assessment of HIST J495

1. Raise vital questions and problems, formulating them clearly and precisely (Critical Thinking Rubric Bullet Point #1).

Application to J495: Finding a proper topic for a research paper that has a clear focus, a clearly defined range of content, and ramifications beyond the direct content discussed (e.g. a topic on college football that provides extensive discussion of the symbolism of sports in American colleges and universities and impact on higher educational institutions).

2. Gather and assess relevant information, using abstract ideas to interpret it effectively; think open-mindedly about alternative systems of thought or beliefs, recognizing and assessing, as need be, their assumptions, implications, and practical consequences; and communicate effectively with others in figuring out solutions to complex problems (Critical Thinking Rubric Bullet Points #2, 4, 5).

Application to J495: The development of the thesis in a research paper, including the extent of sources used and extent of development of thesis, with focus on synthesis, interpretation and analysis of sources and scope of research.

3. Come to well-reasoned conclusions and solutions, testing them against relevant criteria and standards (Critical Thinking Rubric Bullet Point #3).

Application to J495: The conclusion of a research paper, particularly the extent to which the conclusion summarizes and develops the thesis and considers wide-ranging implications.

II. Rubrics and Learning Outcomes for Assessment of HIST J495 Research Papers:

Critical Thinking Rubric Bullet Point #1	4-5 Excellent paper topic with clear focus, clear range of discussion, and rich implications for subjects beyond the literal content	2-3 Decent paper topic that provides decent focus and range of content, and some room for a wider range of implications	1 Poor paper topic that has little focus, unclear range of content, and little or no room for a wider range of implications	Average outcome of all assessed J495 students
Raise vital questions and problems, formulating them clearly and precisely	Number of 5: 12 Number of 4: 6	Number of 3: 13 Number of 2: 5	Number of 1: 5	3.37
Percentage of all assessed J495 students	44%	44%	12%	

<p>Critical Thinking Rubric Bullet Points #2, 4, 5</p>	<p>4-5 Rich collection of research from multiple sources (7-8 or more); excellent use of the skills of interpretation, synthesis, and analysis. Good flow of ideas and organization.</p>	<p>2-3 Decent collection of research from multiple sources (4-6); evidence use of the skills of interpretation, synthesis, and analysis. Evident development of thesis over the course of the paper.</p>	<p>1 Small collection of research (1-3 sources); little or no evident use the skills of interpretation, synthesis, and analysis. Mostly flat layout of evidence with little development.</p>	<p>Average outcome of all assessed J495 students</p>
<p>Gather and assess relevant information, using abstract ideas to interpret it effectively; think open-mindedly about alternative systems of thought or beliefs, recognizing and assessing, as need be, their assumptions, implications, and practical consequences; and communicate effectively with others in figuring out solutions to complex problems</p>	<p>Number of 5: 2 Number of 4: 18</p>	<p>Number of 3: 3 Number of 2: 12</p>	<p>Number of 1: 6</p>	<p>2.95</p>
<p>Percentage of all assessed J495 students</p>	<p>49%</p>	<p>36%</p>	<p>15%</p>	

Critical Thinking Rubric Bullet Point #3	4-5 Strong conclusion capitalizing on the development of the thesis, with implications going beyond the literal content.	2-3 Decent conclusion that capitalizes on the development of the thesis, with some implications going beyond the literal content.	1 Conclusion that basically repeats the thesis from the introduction, with little or no implications going beyond the literal content.	Average outcome of all assessed J495 students
Come to well-reasoned conclusions and solutions, testing them against relevant criteria and standards	Number of 5: 3 Number of 4: 7	Number of 3: 13 Number of 2: 10	Number of 1: 8	2.68
Percentage of all assessed J495 students	24%	56%	20%	

III. Explanation of Methodology

The professors who teach History J495 first agreed upon the application of General Education Assessment Outcome #3: Critical Thinking, Integration, and Application of Knowledge to assessing J495 research papers described in Part I and the rubrics described in Part II. Each professor then individually assessed student research papers in his or her most recent History J495 course. Each student was assigned a numerical value on each of the three rubrics. The individual assessments from each professor were then combined to generate the data in Part II.

IV. Analysis of Results and Areas for Improvement

Students frequently started their research projects in J495 with a clear and interesting topic that allowed for the opportunity for wide-ranging conclusions. While some topics were better than others, few were actually poor. This is probably due to the input and assistance of the instructor in the topic selection process.

Overall scores fell when it came to students collecting, analyzing and incorporating sources to make a strong argument based on their original topic. While most students were able to follow instructions and utilize the correct number of sources in their research projects, the quality of the sources varied considerably. Some students insisted on using Internet sources with little to no academic rigor, despite being warned about that practice before drafts of the paper were due. Other students used appropriate sources, but failed to interrogate them adequately or assess their proper value, instead uncritically taking them at face value. Interest in thinking critically about the way sources present historical information seems low.

The conclusions that students reached often did not live up to the promise of their original topic. This largely has to do with unwillingness on students' part to extrapolate additional meaning from their subject. Students seem to have a hard time answering the question "so what?" Conclusions were frequently merely a restatement of the original topic in different words and did not show any growth or any attempt to apply a narrow topic to larger issues.

Possible avenues for improvement include more emphasis on the discovery and use of sources during the class, especially the middle portion of the semester before long drafts of the research paper are written. This emphasis could come from the instructor, by way of warnings about poor sources and examples of good source usage, and from fellow students, by having students vet each other's growing list of sources. To help students explore more complicated conclusions, the instructor could try to encourage such thinking early in the process through one-on-one meetings on the students' progress. In other words, both additional interaction with the instructor and additional collaborative learning with other students would be beneficial.

In conclusion, many students in History J495 are already thinking critically about historical topics and the sources they use to make arguments about those topics, but there is room for improvement in the selection and use of sources and the depth and breadth of conclusions.