**Complex Assignments**

**What is a Complex Assignment?**

A complex assignment is an assignment that has two or more stages. Students submit their work after they complete each stage and receive feedback on each submission.

**All GE courses are required to have at least one complex assignment.** Instructors are to design their complex assignments to elicit the student learning outcomes (SLOs) associated with the GE core skills that the course will teach and assess.[[1]](#footnote-1)

# Because instructors will use the GE rubrics designated for the GE core skills to evaluate students' assignments, faculty are to craft their complex assignments to ensure that they explicitly require students to demonstrate each student learning outcome in the rubric(s). The [rubrics](https://sites.ewu.edu/generaleducation/files/2018/06/Five-GE-Learning-Outcomes_Spring2018.pdf) can be downloaded by going to the [General Education](file:///C%3A%5CUsers%5Cjilla%5CDesktop%5CTo%20Upload%5CGeneral%20Education) page on EWU’s website at <https://sites.ewu.edu/generaleducation>;

**Why Complex Assignments?**

# A central principle guiding the general education (GE) reform that the Faculty Senate approved was that we would improve GE by enhancing the quality of GE courses. Even more important than restructuring the curriculum, the reform would focus on strengthening what takes place *in the classroom*. That course enrichment would be manifest in at least three ways:

* Each GE course would emphasize the development of one or two of five institutional core skills (in addition to the subject content);
* Assignments that individual GE course instructors design would be a key mechanism through which students would develop the five core skills;
* Students would get formative and summative feedback on their assignments so that they can practice developing the skills.

# scrolling down to the Learn More About Outcomes button; and then scrolling down to the View Outcome Rubrics button. Faculty should include the rubric(s) in the assignment instructions so that students know the criteria for success.

Faculty teaching breadth area courses may create one complex assignment for the two GE core skills their course will teach and assess or they may create two complex assignments (i.e., one for each skill).

Some assignments will readily lend themselves to multi-stage activities because the rubric implies that there will be a project of some sort and a reflection on aspects of that project. (See “There’s Something Funny about the Information Literacy Rubric and Creative Thinking Rubric” below.) In those cases, you might have students submit the project and reflection in separate stages (in whichever order makes sense). Other assignments might not be intrinsically multi-staged. In these cases, you may want to have students submit multiple drafts that are increasingly more developed. Regardless, you would provide feedback to students after each stage and before the next one. Using the rubric for the feedback may cut down on the time this process takes.

If different stages of your complex assignment bear on different SLOs—say, for example, the project students submit to you in stage 1 is designed for them to demonstrate (and, therefore, for you to assess) the second and third SLOs of the analytical thinking rubric and stage 2 is designed for the first and fourth analytical thinking SLOs—you will, of course, only use part of the rubric for each stage. By the end of the whole complex assignment (i.e., the last stage), you will have scores for each of the rubric SLOs for every student. If you use Canvas’s outcomes feature for your assessment, you should import each “outcome” (i.e., SLO) individually for each stage of the assignment rather than the rubric as a whole.

The key takeaway is that all assignments should derive logically from the learning outcomes they are designed to assess. When developing your complex assignment, be sure to carefully tailor each aspect of it to the SLOs in the rubric.

**Sample Complex Assignment Instructions**

**There’s Something Funny about the Information Literacy Rubric and Creative Thinking Rubric**

If you inspect the GE rubrics carefully, you’ll discover that two of them—information literacy and creative thinking—contain SLOs that require students to submit a core assignment and a reflection on that assignment. This is because they have SLOs that necessitate your having direct access to students' thought processes while crafting their core assignment. As a result, you’ll want to assign some sort of supplemental document in which they describe their thought processes.

For instance, chances are if you chose information literacy as one of the two GE outcomes your course will teach and assess, you will want to assign a research paper as your complex assignment. A research paper would enable you to assess two of the four SLOs in the information literacy rubric in a straightforward way. For instance, for the SLO "Use information to effectively accomplish a clear purpose," you would judge the degree to which the student's paper incorporated relevant information from outside sources to bolster an argument. For the SLO "Accurately employ scholarly conventions for attributing information to its source," you would evaluate whether the paper accurately used citations in the body of the document and had a correctly formatted and complete reference list.

You could not use the research paper itself as a means of assessing the other two information literacy SLOs, however, because they require you to know the process students used to craft their research paper. For you to evaluate how effectively students "Utilize search strategies to find relevant information," your complex assignment will likely entail a step in which students submit a supplemental document in which they *describe how* they searched for the studies they used in their research paper (e.g., which databases they used, how they made choices about which databases to use, what their search terms were, etc.). So that you could evaluate the SLO "Applies sound criteria (i.e., credibility, accuracy, and currency) to render an educated judgment about the quality of information," you would need students to submit a supplemental document (or perhaps an addendum to their paper) in which they *explain how* they evaluated the quality of the information they included in their paper—that is, what criteria they used to decide that each study they cited was sound and how they determined whether the study met those criteria. (See Sample Complex Assignment Instructions below.)

Likewise, it may be difficult for you to draw direct inferences about the three creative thinking SLOs: “Integrates alternate, divergent, or contradictory perspectives or ideas,” “Connects ideas or solutions in novel ways,” and “Creates a novel or unique idea, question, format, or product.” If the novelty of the integration, connection, and creation won’t be self-evident to you, you will want to ask students to annotate their project by explicating what the “alternate, divergent, or contradictory perspectives” are that they have integrated, how the connection they have made between ideas or solutions is novel, and what makes their “idea, question, format, or product” unique.

In sum, be sure that your assignment is carefully designed to ensure that students demonstrate each student learning outcome in the GE rubric designated for the GE outcome(s) your course has selected to teach and assess.

**Purpose[[2]](#endnote-1)**

The purpose of this multi-stage assignment is to enable you to develop and demonstrate your:

* Knowledge of an issue in modern European historiography
* History research skills
* Information literacy skills
* Written communication skills

Why do these outcomes matter?[[3]](#endnote-2) The first two course outcomes will help History majors acquire the knowledge and skills they need to master their degree program’s program learning outcomes. Moreover, History and non-history majors alike may find that learning about modern European historiography and developing history research skills enriches their intellectual lives. The last two outcomes are general education outcomes. These skills are critical to success in all majors. Further, to be an educated citizen in the information age, one needs to be information literate. Lastly, writing effectively is a key professional skill that is necessary for success in almost all careers.

**Tasks[[4]](#endnote-3)**

Task 1[[5]](#endnote-4): Select a controversial issue within modern European historiography that you want to research. Submit your idea to Prof. Kern for feedback. If the topic is not approved, resubmit.

*Recommendations:*

* *Review “Modern European Historiography Controversies” (available on the course’s Canvas page)*
* *Skim the course text book (especially the index)*
* *Do pre-research on the web and in the library to identify a topic*

Due: Sept. 28. (Resubmissions are due by Oct. 5)

Task 2: Brainstorm keywords in class. Feedback given in class by fellow students. (Oct. 8)

Task 3: Go to library and search for relevant scholarly sources (academic articles, historical monographs, primary sources) using your keywords. Fill in the search log template provided in class (and posted on Canvas) by listing the databases used, each search term entered, and one or two representative sources that the search yielded.

*Recommendations:*

* *Read “Searching Jstor.pdf” (on Canvas) for instructions in how to use Jstor, a scholarly database.*
* *Use Google to find the names of high quality databases for scholarly sources in history. (If you do this, list it in your log along with your search terms.) See which of databases EWU has. Use one or more for your search. Take notes of which databases and which search terms were most useful, what it was about the quality of the sources they turned up that led you to find them to be useful, and include these notes in your log.*
* *Use Google to help you find primary source material on your topic.*
* *Work with a reference librarian.*

Grade: Counts toward 5% of your course grade. See rubric below for success criteria.

Due: October 19

Task 4: Select at least five sources that you plan to use for your term paper. In the source evaluation log template provided in class (and posted on Canvas) indicate why you chose each source and how each meets the criteria of credibility, accuracy, and currency.

*Recommendations:*

* *Google “credibility, accuracy, and currency” to learn what these terms mean within the context of information evaluation.*

Grade: Counts toward 9% of your course grade. See rubric below for success criteria.

Due: October 31

Task 5: Using Chicago notes bibliographic style, create a bibliography of the five or more sources listed in your source evaluation log.

*Recommendation: Look at “Chicago-Style Footnotes and Bibl.pdf” (on Canvas) for detailed instructions in how to write footnotes and bibliography.*

Grade: Counts toward 1% of your course grade. (Pass/Fail)

Due: November 7

Task 6: Write a five- to eight-page paper in which you take a position on a controversial issue in modern European historiography and defend your position using evidence from primary sources and scholarly secondary sources. Use Chicago Style for in-text citations, footnotes, bibliography, and headings.

Grade: Counts toward 30% of your course grade. See rubric below for success criteria.

Due: November 30

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| **Success Criteria[[6]](#endnote-5)** |
| **The purpose of this multi-stage assignment is to enable you to develop and demonstrate the following:[[7]](#endnote-6)** | **You will demonstrate the learning outcome in the following assignment:**  |
| HIST106 CLO-1 | Knowledge of an issue in modern European historiography. | Term paper |
|  | The ability to: |  |
| Information Literacy: GE-IL-SLO-1 | * Utilize search strategies to find relevant information.
 | Search log |
| Information Literacy: GE-IL-SLO-2 | * Apply sound criteria (i.e., credibility, accuracy, and currency) to render an educated judgment about the quality of information.
 | Source evaluation log |
| Information Literacy: GE-IL-SLO-3 | * Use information to effectively accomplish a clear purpose.
 | Term paper |
| Information Literacy: GE-IL-SLO-4 | * Accurately employ scholarly conventions for attributing information to its source.
 | Bib assignment;  |
| Term paper (in-text citations, footnotes & bib) |
| Written Communication: GE-WC-SLO-1 | * Clarify the purpose of a document (by, for instance, articulating a thesis statement when appropriate).
 | Term paper |
| Written Communication: GE-WC-SLO-2 | * Convey meaning clearly throughout the document.
 | Term paper |
| Written Communication: GE-WC-SLO-3 | * Organize a document logically.
 | Term paper |
| Written Communication: GE-WC-SLO-4 | * Make choices concerning style, tone, and degree of complexity that are appropriate to the audience.
 | Term paper |
| HIST106: CLO-2 | * Conduct historical research using primary and secondary sources.
 | Term paper |

Notes on the Sample Complex Assignment Instructions

1. 1 Faculty members who propose a course to the General Education Council for approval as a GE breadth area course need to identify one core skill from "Column A" (i.e., written communication, quantitative literacy) and one from "Column B" (i.e., analytical thinking, creative thinking, information literacy) that the course will teach and assess. Those who propose a course to count for the diversity or global studies requirements need to select one from Column B only. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Research shows that student learning from assignments is enhanced when the instructor makes the purpose of the assignment explicit and indicates which course learning outcomes it is designed to enable students to develop and demonstrate. (See <https://www.unlv.edu/provost/transparency/tilt-higher-ed-examples-and-resources> for research on and resources for transparent teaching. Also, go to the [Transparent Assignment Template](https://sites.ewu.edu/assessment-accreditation/files/2018/06/Transparent-Assignment-Template.pdf.pdf) and the [Transparent Assignment Checklist](https://sites.ewu.edu/assessment-accreditation/files/2018/06/Checklist-for-Transparent-Assignment-Design.pdf) under [Assessment Resources Step 3](https://sites.ewu.edu/assessment-accreditation/assessment/assessment-resources/step-3-how-to-create-methods-to-assess-slos/) on EWU’s [Assessment and Accreditation Website](https://sites.ewu.edu/assessment-accreditation/assessment/assessment-resources/step-3-how-to-create-methods-to-assess-slos/).) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
3. Studies indicate that student motivation on assignments is enhanced when the professor explains how the knowledge and skills to be learned through the assignment will benefit the student. The instructor should help the student see how the knowledge and skills will transfer to their other courses, their careers, and their lives as citizens in a democracy. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
4. Research shows that the more explicit and concrete the instructions are for completing an assignment, the better students do. This is particularly the case for students from historically under-represented groups. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
5. As a complex assignment, the instructor should provide feedback to students after each assignment submission. The feedback should be designed to enable students to build their skills as they move forward through each stage of the assignment. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
6. Research shows that including the rubric that you will use to assess students’ assignments significantly improves performance. Providing more detail than what is shown in this sample rubric above is recommended. Along with the instructions for each of the assignments that students submit (e.g., the search log, the source evaluation log, the term paper), you might provide a supplemental rubric that fleshes out the learning outcomes more fully and has examples that students can emulate. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
7. Explaining the concept of general education outcomes, course learning outcomes, and program learning outcomes to students and informing them of what those outcomes are are considered best teaching practices. Learning is improved when students understand that faculty have thoughtfully designed the curriculum to enable them to acquire particular skills prior to graduation and that each course is a piece of a whole, not just an isolated experience. This can help students understand faculty members’ expectation that they transfer and build on skills from one course to another. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)