Appendix 4
An assessment to show how well students can recognize assumptions in primary sources (2e)

Dealing with Evidence: Primary sources
Skill: Identifying the assumptions made by the author of a source

Bottleneck: In my J300 seminar on the history of ideas about conflict and competition in Western culture students have trouble moving beyond simply repeating the ideas of thinkers when they are asked to analyze developments on papers.

What needs to be modeled: One of the things that historians do to get past simple repetition is to consider the implicit assumptions in a text.

Assessment: By the fourth week I was interested in seeing if students were beginning to be able to do this kind of analysis. Therefore, on their weekly on-line assignment I asked (among other questions) to do the following:

1) Indicate one assumption that Hobbes makes about human nature.
2) Provide a short passage in which this assumption is implicit
3) Provide the page number in reader on which this passage may be found
4) Explain what in this passage convinces them that Hobbes was making this assumption.
5) Imagine that Hobbes was brought back to life, a century after his death, and presented with this passage from the Declaration of Independence: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

Briefly describe one assumption of Hobbes that would make him think that this passage was nonsense.

Examples of different levels of response:
High
1) Hobbes believes that each individual person has free will.
2) "The right of nature (...) is the liberty each man hath to use his own power as he will himself for the preservation of his own nature; that is to say, of his own life"
3) p. 100
4) Hobbes is saying that each person has his own power to run his own life and determine his own 'nature' which to me says that each person has the ability to make their own decisions and determine their own fate.
5) I think that Hobbes would disagree with the pursuit of Happiness as an unalienable right because the pursuit of Happiness could lead to people attempting to overthrow the government rather than leisure. 

This student moved beyond repeating Hobbes’ argument and considered a belief that was only implicit in his thought. The presentation of Hobbes’ view of the Declaration of Independence was a little less impressive, but this student seems to have a good grasp of the notion of assumptions.

Medium

6) Humans are naturally war like and will fight for self-preservation.

7) “because the condition of man is a condition of war of every one against every one, in which case everyone is governed by his own reason”

8) p. 100

9) He states that men are war like because everyone is looking out for themselves, not others.

10) Hobbes would think this was nonsense because he believes that for man to have life, liberty, and happiness, they must have a leader to say what is just. without a leader, these things are not possible. they are not a natural right.

This student has clearly understood Hobbes’ argument, but she remained with the literal statement of his views and did not attempt to reconstruct the implicit assumptions built into his position.

Low

11) The never dying quest for power

12) "I put for a general inclination of all mankind a perpetual and restless desire of power"

13) p. 96

14) It is explicit in the passage

15) He doesn’t believe in the giving of rights

This student also has some idea of Hobbes position, but makes no attempt to really find assumptions.

Conclusions:

By this point in the semester some students were beginning to be able to attempt some serious historical analysis, but more in-class work was needed to help the rest of the class understand how to move from what was explicit to what was implicit in historical texts.