

Primary and Secondary Sources

Primary and secondary sources are both essential to the study of people and cultures past and present, and students should be introduced to both types of materials and learn to utilize them together to construct understanding.

What is a primary source?

A primary source is a document or physical object which was written or created during the time under study. These sources were present during an experience or time period and offer an inside view of a particular event. Primary sources that are thoughtfully selected can help to bring history and cultures to life for students. Most basically, they are defined as the direct evidence of a time and place that you are studying – any material (documents, objects, etc.) that was produced by eyewitnesses to or participants in an event or historical moment under investigation.

Some types of primary sources include:

- ORIGINAL DOCUMENTS (excerpts or translations acceptable): Diaries, speeches, manuscripts, letters, interviews, news film footage, autobiographies, official records
- CREATIVE WORKS: Poetry, drama, novels, music, art
- RELICS OR ARTIFACTS: Pottery, furniture, clothing, buildings

The following are examples of primary sources when they are used to answer questions about the time or place in which they were produced:

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| ▪ photographs | ▪ immigration records |
| ▪ letters | ▪ drawings |
| ▪ artifacts | ▪ maps from the place or time |
| ▪ diaries | ▪ ships' logs |
| ▪ works of art such as | ▪ ledger books |
| paintings/sculptures/quilts | ▪ labor records |
| ▪ fiction | ▪ recorded oral histories and people speaking |
| ▪ poetry | for themselves |
| ▪ journals | ▪ texts or recordings of speeches |
| ▪ autobiographies | ▪ architectural landmarks |
| ▪ music and songs | ▪ charts/graphs |
| ▪ memoirs | ▪ sound recordings |
| ▪ cartoons | ▪ documentary film |
| ▪ census records | |

What is a secondary source?

A secondary source interprets and analyzes primary sources. These sources are one or more steps removed from the event. Secondary sources may have pictures, quotes or graphics of primary sources in them. Secondary sources are interpretations – often generated by scholars – that are based upon the examination of multiple primary sources.

Some types of secondary sources include:

- **PUBLICATIONS:** Textbooks, magazine articles, histories, criticisms, commentaries, encyclopedias

The following are examples of secondary sources:

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ reference books▪ popular periodical literature▪ history textbooks▪ journal articles▪ radio or television documentaries | <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ general historical works and monographs Monographs are full-length books dealing with a relatively narrow topic and typically are intended for people with some background in the subject. Monographs typically rely on primary sources and are well-documented, with numerous citations. |
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Adapted from... www.princeton.edu and www.primarysource.org

Resources for primary and secondary sources:

www.primarysource.org

<http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/primarysourcesets/>

http://www.yalewww.primarysource.org.edu/collections_collaborative/primarysources/primarysources.html

<http://www.library.illinois.edu/ugl/howdoi/secondarysources.html>