

FINDING PRIMARY SOURCES

WHAT ARE PRIMARY SOURCES?

Primary sources are materials written or created by someone who participated in or witnessed the events described. They reflect the individual point of view of the participant or observer. Researchers use primary sources to obtain accurate information about what actually happened during an historical event or time period. (*Secondary* sources are explained on page 4 of this guide.)

The items described below are examples of primary sources that are useful to researchers:

1. **Diaries, journals, speeches, interviews, letters, memos, manuscripts, and other papers** in which individuals describe events in which they were participants or observers.
2. **Memoirs and autobiographies.** These may be less reliable than diaries or letters since they are usually written long after events occurred and may be distorted by bias, dimming memory, or the revised perspective that may come with hindsight. On the other hand, sometimes they are the only sources available for certain information.
3. **Oral history** interviews provide important primary information for historians. Whether the interview is formal or informal, this type of research often provides unique and enlightening perspectives.
4. **Records of or information collected by government agencies.** Official records (births, deaths, marriages; permits/licenses; census data; etc.) document conditions in the society.
5. **Records of organizations.** The minutes, reports, correspondence, etc. of an organization or agency serve as an ongoing record of the activity and thinking of that specific group.
6. **Published materials** (books, magazine, journal, and newspaper articles) written about a particular event at the time it happened. These may be accounts by participants, but in most cases they are written by journalists or other observers. It is important to distinguish between reports written at the time of an event and material written much later as historical analysis.
7. **Materials that document the attitudes and popular thought of a historical period.** If you want to find evidence of the mentality of an era, or of a group (a world view, a set of attitudes, or the popular perception of an event or condition), an obvious source is **public opinion polls** taken at the time. Since these are limited in availability and in what they reveal, it is also helpful to make use of ideas and images conveyed in the mass media, and in literature, film, popular fiction, textbooks, etc. These sources, written or produced at the time, should be used as evidence of how people were thinking.
8. **Photographs, audio or video recordings, and films** that document an event.
9. **Research data** such as anthropological field notes, the results of scientific experiments, and other scholarly activity of the time.
10. **Artifacts of all kinds:** physical objects, buildings, furniture, tools, appliances, household items, clothing, toys, etc.

STRATEGIES FOR FINDING PRIMARY SOURCES

Tips to facilitate your research:

1. **Read materials that provide background information** about the person or event. Consult an encyclopedia or other authoritative source to learn details such as:
 - Significant dates (when the person lived or an event occurred)
 - Names of people associated with the event or person you are studying
 - Geographic locations relevant to your study
 - Government involvement (political leaders or documents associated with the event)
2. **Search the catalog** to find materials related to your topic. Be sure to try different “fields,” including Keywords in Title, Author, Subject, and General Keyword.
3. **Search the Library’s *Historical New York Times*** database for newspaper articles about events that happened during or after 1851, the year the paper was first published. (To access the online databases, go to the library website and click on “Databases.”)
4. **Search additional databases** when appropriate. They are accessible through the Library’s home page both on- and off-campus. The databases below are most likely to contain historical information, but others might be useful for historical research related to particular disciplines.)
 - **Academic Search Premier** – provides reprints of major documents of historical interest, such as Abraham Lincoln’s writings and speeches, documents about women’s suffrage, selected political writings, treaties, major speeches, etc.
 - **America: History and Life** – covers the history of the United States and Canada from prehistory to the present. (The articles in this database are usually secondary sources, but they might contain reprinted excerpts from primary sources.)
 - **Historical Abstracts** – a large database containing references to published works about world history (excluding the United States and Canada). Covers 1450 to the present. (The articles in this database are usually secondary sources but might contain reprinted excerpts from primary sources.)
5. **Search the Web for historical journals, newspapers, personal narratives, and other documents.**

The following sites offer extensive lists of primary sources that are available electronically:

- **Making of America** – a large collection of full-text books and journal articles from the antebellum period through reconstruction. <http://moa.umdl.umich.edu/index.html>
- **American Memory** (from the Library of Congress) Provides access to writings, sound recordings, photographs, films, music, maps, etc. that document American history. <http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/index.html>
- **The Avalon Project: Documents in Law, History and Diplomacy** (from Yale) Provides access to large digital collections of international documents from ancient times through the present. <http://avalon.law.yale.edu/>

- **EuroDocs: Primary Historical Documents from Western Europe.** This wiki contains digital versions of Western European historical documents that are transcribed, reproduced in facsimile, or translated. Most information found on the site is primary. (Caution: Notice the disclaimer regarding accuracy.)
http://eudocs.lib.byu.edu/index.php/Main_Page
- **History Matters: The U.S. Survey Course on the Web.** Contains 1,000 primary documents focusing on the lives of “ordinary Americans.” The sites mentioned have been screened by historians. <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/>
- **Internet Library of Early Journals.** Provides searchable digitized versions of six United Kingdom publications from the 18th and 19th Century. A twenty-year run of issues is provided for most. <http://www.bodley.ox.ac.uk/ilej/>
- **Internet Modern History Sourcebook.** One of a series of online history sourcebooks. Provides a very large collection of primary sources related to modern European, American, and Latin American history.
<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/modsbook.html>
- **Making of America** – a large collection of full-text books and journal articles from the antebellum period through reconstruction
<http://moa.umdl.umich.edu/index.html>
- **Primary Sources on the Web.** UC at Berkeley offers a large collection of digitized primary sources, mainly on American history. (Some sites are password protected.)
<http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/TeachingLib/Guides/PrimarySourcesOnTheWeb.html>

For additional sources, visit the Library's home page. Select Internet Resources > Internet Sites Arranged by Subject > History (Primary Sources).

6. **Search print indexes for historical information.** The following indexes may provide citations for articles related to your topic.
- *An Index to Periodical Literature by W. F. Poole (published 1853)*
 - *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature (1900-1996)*
 - *Nineteenth Century Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature, 1890-1899, with Supplementary Indexing, 1900-1920*

REPUBLISHED PRIMARY SOURCES

Primary sources do not have to appear in their original format to be useful. Republished primary sources are often easier to find and use than the original materials. Examples of republished primary documents include:

- collections of letters
- diaries, journals, notebooks
- autobiographies
- historical newspaper, magazine, and journal articles
- speeches
- public papers

Excerpts from primary sources may appear in works that are actually secondary. The reprinted excerpt may be used as a primary source if it is a direct quote (not paraphrased or changed from the original). Examples of works that often contain excerpts from primary sources include:

- biographies
- journal articles
- scholarly books on historical topics

WHAT ARE SECONDARY SOURCES?

A **secondary source** is a work that is the result of an investigation of primary sources. It is generally *at least one step removed from the event*. Secondary sources usually include an interpretation or analysis of an historical event or phenomenon. Examples include biographies, books on historical topics, and most journal or magazine articles. A recent article that evaluates and analyzes the relationship between the feminist movement and the labor movement in turn-of-the-century England is an example of a secondary source. If you were to look at the bibliography of the article, you would see that the author's research was based on both primary sources, such as labor union documents, speeches, and personal letters, as well as other secondary sources.

To find **secondary sources**, look in the library's online catalog (for books and other monographs) or consult periodical databases, such as those listed under #4 above.

For secondary sources on historical topics, search ***America: History and Life*** or ***Historical Abstracts***. ***Academic Search Premier*** and ***Project Muse*** also provide many citations and full text articles related to history.

Note: Encyclopedias, textbooks, dictionaries, and handbooks on historical topics are classified as **tertiary sources**. They are useful for background information, such as names, dates, definitions, and an overview of an event, but they are not suitable for using as reference sources for history research papers.

If you need assistance with using any of the databases or with finding materials, please consult a reference librarian.

Adapted with permission from materials developed by the University of California at Berkeley and the University of North Carolina at Wilmington.

Rev. Aug. '09