

Library Research Using Primary Sources

I. Definitions

WHAT ARE PRIMARY SOURCES?

Primary sources enable the researcher to get as close as possible to what actually happened during an historical event or time period. A primary source reflects the individual viewpoint of a participant or observer.

Undergraduates are sometimes allowed to use a broader definition of primary sources, which may include some of the types of materials listed below. If in doubt, ask your instructor.

- **Diaries, journals, speeches, interviews, letters, memos, manuscripts and other papers** in which individuals describe events in which they were participants or observers.
- **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, they are sometimes the only source for certain information.
- **Records of or information collected by government agencies.** Many kinds of records (births, deaths, marriages; permits and licences issued; census data; etc.) document conditions in the society.
- **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 organization or agency.
- **Published materials** (books, magazine and journal articles, newspaper articles) written at the time about a particular event. While these are sometimes accounts by participants, in most cases they are written by journalists or other observers. The important thing is to distinguish between material written at the time of an event as a kind of report, and material written much later, as historical analysis.
- **Photographs, audio recordings and moving pictures or video recordings,** documenting what happened.
- **Materials that document the attitudes and popular thought of a historical time period.** If you are attempting to find evidence documenting the mentality or psychology of a time, or of a group (evidence of a world view, a set of attitudes, or the popular understanding of an event or condition), the most obvious source is **public opinion polls** taken at the time. Since these are generally very limited in availability and in what they reveal, however, it is also possible to make use of ideas and images conveyed in the mass media, and even in **literature, film, popular fiction, textbooks,** etc. Again, the point is to use these sources, written or produced at the time, as evidence of how people were thinking.

- **Research data** such as anthropological field notes, the results of scientific experiments, and other scholarly activity of the time.
- **Artifacts of all kinds:** physical objects, buildings, furniture, tools, appliances and household items, clothing, toys.

Reprinted Primary Sources

Some primary sources, such as diaries or letters, are original manuscripts which exist in only one place in the world. Others, such as newspaper articles or transcripts of speeches, exist in multiple copies but may be hard to find.

Look for reprinted primary source materials that are available on campus, such as books that collect speeches, letters, or government documents; microfilm collections of the papers of an organization; or videos of archival newsreel footage. These materials are often more accessible and easier to use than the original materials. You can search for these primary sources in library catalogs using primary source subheadings (see III section 1., below).

PRINT. Some compilations of reprinted primary source materials appear in books which can often be found in reference collections, or which can be checked out from campus libraries:

- *Documents of American History*
- *Speeches of the American Presidents*
- *The People's Republic of China: A Documentary Survey, 1949-1979*
- *A woman doctor's Civil War : Esther Hill Hawks' diary*
- *The letters of Frida Kahlo*

MICROFILM. The Library maintains a rich microform collection of primary sources, all of which are accompanied by guides or indexes. These microform collections may be compilations of letters, manuscripts, and other documents on a particular topic.

INTERNET. Increasingly, libraries are digitizing archival resources and providing access to these special collections through the Web. Many digital library collections contain excellent primary resources such as photographs, scanned images of letters or the full-text of books and journals.

WHAT ARE SECONDARY SOURCES?

A secondary source is a work that interprets or analyzes an historical event or phenomenon. It is generally at least one step removed from the event. 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 this 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. Textbooks and encyclopedias are also examples of secondary sources.

To find secondary sources, look in the library catalogs (for books and other monographs) or periodical indexes such as **Historical Abstracts** or **America: History & Life** both at <http://serials.abc-clio.com>.

II. Getting Started: Background Information

1. FIND THE RIGHT REFERENCE SOURCE.

A good first step in finding primary materials is to look at the resources in the library's reference collection. These sources will give you a good overview of the topic, will outline the basic historical context and will help you identify **key participants, dates** and **publications** associated with your topic.

Ask a librarian or professor to suggest reference sources or textbooks, such as **specialized encyclopedias, chronologies** or **factbooks** which will give you an historical overview of a topic or event and identify the participants. If you have specific people in mind already, **biographical dictionaries** and **encyclopedias** will give you background information and bibliographies of primary and secondary sources.

Books and historical journal articles (especially those with extensive bibliographies) and other secondary sources can give you background information and clues as to the participants involved and source materials which might be available.

Specialized bibliographies and guides to research often give both an introductory overview of how to go about researching a particular topic as well as list specific primary and secondary sources.

Examples of specialized encyclopedias, chronologies and handbooks:

- *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*
- *Historical Dictionary of the French Revolution*
- *Encyclopedia of Asian History*
- *Encyclopedia of the Holocaust*

Examples of biographical sources:

- *Current Biography* (1940-present)
- *Dictionary of American Biography*

Examples of bibliographies and guides to research:

- *Guide to Sources in Medieval History*
- *A Guide to Sources of British Military History*
- *Modern China: 1840-1972: An Introduction to Sources and Research Aids*

2. IDENTIFY KEY PARTICIPANTS, DATES AND PUBLICATIONS ASSOCIATED WITH YOUR TOPIC.

When looking at reference sources, pick out names of people, organizations, and governmental agencies that were participants, and any publications such as reports, newsletters, magazines, pamphlets, etc. that they produced in conjunction with the events or developments you are researching. Search for these names and titles in the library catalogs (see section III 1. below, "Use the Online Library Catalogs.")

A. Search by subject (Library of Congress Subject Headings)

In order to use the library catalogs to find primary sources on a subject, you must first identify the Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH). LC Subject Headings are standardized terms developed by the Library of Congress to describe materials listed in catalogs. To determine the appropriate subject headings associated with your topic you can:

- Ask a librarian.
- Look in the four red volumes of the **Library of Congress Subject Headings** book located near the reference desk in most libraries.
- Look up the catalog record for a book that you already know about, display the record in long format and then do a subject search based on the subject headings listed.

You should know that the official subject heading assigned to a book is not necessarily a commonly-used term. For instance, the LCSH for the Vietnam War is NOT "Vietnam War" but rather "Vietnamese conflict, 1961-1975."

Once you have identified the appropriate Library of Congress Subject Heading, you can pair that heading with specific subheadings that identify materials as primary sources. Some of the subheadings are:

correspondence
diaries
early works to 1800
interviews
pamphlets
periodicals
personal narratives
sources

You can add any of the subheadings listed above with a Library of Congress Subject Heading to specifically search for primary source material. For example:

- world war 1939-1945 england personal narratives
 - student movements japan history sources
 - anarchism united states pamphlets
 - france revolution correspondence
 - soviet union history revolution 1917-1921 pamphlets
 - women suffrage united states history sources
- etc.

B. Look up the people, organizations, and agencies as authors.

Materials that were written or produced by them either at the time of the event or later will, in most cases, be primary sources.

Examples:

In any of the catalogs, look up individual names as **personal author** or **author**.

sanger, margaret
pankhurst, christabel

Look up group names or organizations as **corporate author** or **author**.

american birth control league
retrieves a collection of pamphlets they issued
congress of racial equality
retrieves the Congress or Racial Equality (CORE) papers

corporate author: woman's christian temperance union
retrieves *The Temperance Educational Quarterly*

2. USE PERIODICAL AND NEWSPAPER INDEXES COVERING THE TIME PERIOD

Finding newspaper and magazine articles from the time period you are researching is a two-step process. To find citations to individual articles, use a newspaper or periodical index. These indexes are available in print and/or electronic formats.

Newspaper indexes:

- *Atlanta Journal Constitution (1971-1979, 1982-2002)*
- *Index to the Times (London) (1868 -)*
- *New York Times (1851-2000)*
- *New York Times Historical (1851- 2003) available in ProQuest*

Periodical indexes:

- *American Periodical Series (1740-1900) available in ProQuest*
- *Cumulative Index to Periodical Literature (1959-1978)*
- *Essay and General Literature Index (1900-1999)*
- *International Index to Periodicals (1906-1965)*
- *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature (1900-2000)*
- *Social Sciences and Humanities Index (1965-1974)*
- *Wellesley Index to Victorian Periodicals (1824-1900)*