



PRIMARY SOURCES & ANALYSIS

Primary sources are interesting to read for their own sake: they give us first hand, you-are-there insights into the past. They are also the most important tools an historian has for developing an understanding of an event. Primary sources serve as the evidence an historian uses in developing an interpretation and in building an argument to support that interpretation. You will be using primary sources not only to help you better understand what went on, but also as evidence as you answer questions and develop arguments about the past.

READING A PRIMARY SOURCE

Primary Sources do not speak for themselves, they have to be interpreted. That is, we can't always immediately understand what a primary source means, especially if it is from a culture significantly different from our own. It is therefore necessary to try to understand what it means and to figure out what the source can tell us about the past.

To help you interpret **textual**, primary sources, you should think about these questions as you examine the source:

A. Place the source in its historical context.

- 1. Who wrote it? What do you know about the author?
- 2. Where and when was it written?
- 3. Why was it written?
- 4. To what audience is it addressed? What do you know about this audience?

B. Classify the source.

- 1. What kind of work is it?
- 2. What was its purpose?
- 3. What are the important conventions and traditions governing this kind of source? Of what legal, political, religious or philosophical traditions is it a part?

C. Understand the source.

- 1. What are the key words in the source and what do they mean?
- 2. What point is the author trying to make? Summarize the thesis.
- 3. What evidence does the author give to support the thesis?
- 4. What assumptions underlay the argument?

- 5. What values does the source reflect?
- 6. What problems does it address? Can you relate these problems to the historical situation?
- 7. What action does the author expect as a result of this work? Who is to take this action? How does the source motivate that action?

D. Evaluate the source as a source of historical information.

- 1. How typical is this source for this period?
- 2. How widely was this source circulated?
- 3. What problems, assumptions, arguments, ideas and values, if any, does it share with other sources from this period?
- 4. What other evidence can you find to corroborate your conclusions?

PRIMARY SOURCES

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 are original materials. They are from the time period involved and have not been filtered through interpretation or evaluation. Primary sources are original materials on which other research is based. They are usually the first formal appearance of results in physical, print or electronic format. They present original thinking, report a discovery, or share new information.

Examples include:

- Artifacts (e.g. coins, plant specimens, fossils, furniture, tools, clothing, all from the time under study);
- Audio recordings (e.g. radio programs)
- Diaries;
- Internet communications on email, listservs;
- Interviews (e.g., oral histories, telephone, e-mail);
- Journal articles published in peer-reviewed publications;
- Letters;
- Newspaper articles written at the time;
- Original Documents (i.e. birth certificate, will, marriage license, trial transcript);

- Patents;
- Photographs
- Proceedings of Meetings, conferences and symposia;
- Records of organizations, government agencies (e.g. annual report, treaty, constitution, government document);
- Speeches;
- Survey Research (e.g., market surveys, public opinion polls);
- Video recordings (e.g. television programs);
- Works of art, architecture, literature, and music (e.g., paintings, sculptures, musical scores, buildings, novels, poems).

SECONDARY SOURCES

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. They appear after event and can provide more balanced view of event, at times. Secondary sources are less easily defined than primary sources. Generally, they are accounts written after the fact with the benefit of hindsight. Secondary sources are not evidence, but rather commentary on and discussion of evidence. However, what some define as a secondary source, others define as a tertiary source. Context is everything.

Some types of secondary sources include:

- Bibliographies (also considered tertiary);
- Biographical works;
- Commentaries, criticisms;
- Dictionaries, Encyclopedias (also considered tertiary);
- Histories;
- Journal articles (depending on the discipline can be primary);
- Magazine and newspaper articles (this distinction varies by discipline);
- Monographs, other than fiction and autobiography;
- Textbooks (also considered tertiary);

- Web site (also considered primary).

TERTIARY SOURCES

Tertiary sources consist of information which is a distillation and collection of primary and secondary sources.

- Almanacs;
- Bibliographies (also considered secondary);
- Chronologies;
- Dictionaries and Encyclopedias (also considered secondary);
- Directories;
- Fact books;
- Guidebooks;
- Indexes, abstracts, bibliographies used to locate primary and secondary sources;
- Manuals;
- Textbooks (also be secondary).

Example of Comparison Across Disciplines of Source Types:

SUBJECT	PRIMARY	SECONDARY	TERTIARY
Art and Architecture	Painting by Monet	Article critiquing art piece	ArtStor database
Chemistry/Life Sciences	Einstein's diary	Monograph on Einstein's life	Dictionary on Theory of Relativity
Engineering/Physical Sciences	Patent	NTIS database	Manual on using invention
Humanities	Letters by Martin Luther King	Web site on King's writings	Encyclopedia on Civil Rights Movement
Social Sciences	Notes taken by clinical psychologist	Magazine article about the psychological condition	Textbook on clinical psychology
Performing Arts	Movie filmed in 1942	Biography of the director	Guide to the movie

ORAL HISTORY

Some cultures have no written records

Oral histories are accounts given by a person of events earlier in their life. They are unwritten verbal accounts of events. Often, they are taken by family members, historians, archivists, or others who interview older people in an attempt to document events and lives that might otherwise be forgotten. These sources are passed from generation to generation.

Oral histories are valuable. But when using them as primary sources, it is important to consider that memory is fallible. In the intervening years between the events and the recounting of them, a person may be influenced by others' accounts as well as books or even movies about the events in question. In general with primary sources, the closer in time to the events that the account is given, the more reliable it is considered to be.

Examples can include:

- stories
- customs
- songs
- traditions