
Get to the Source: What are Primary and Secondary Sources? Julianne Phillips, Ph D.

History and culture are best understood through the eyes, ears, ideas and creations of those people whose experiences we can examine. Primary resources are the window through which we explore this heritage.

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Historians use a wide variety of sources to answer questions about the past. In their research, history scholars use both **primary sources** and **secondary sources**. **Primary sources** are actual records that have survived from the past, such as letters, photographs, and articles of clothing. **Secondary sources** are accounts of the past created by people writing about events some time after they happened.

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. Primary sources may include some of the types of materials listed below:

- **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 licenses issued; census data; etc.) document conditions in 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 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.

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.

WHY ARE THEY IMPORTANT?

Dayton Public Schools adopted the Ohio Academic Content Standards for Social Studies as its Social Studies curriculum. This content is covered by the Ohio Graduation Test (OGT) which encompasses world studies from 1750 to the present, and United States studies from 1877 to the present. Many test items will present primary source data and information such as text, tables, charts, graphs, maps and illustrations. Students should be able to apply this data and information when answering questions posed in the test items. Students need to integrate their content knowledge with their analysis of primary and secondary sources and reach conclusions based on this information for test answers.

Sources

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