Primary Source Guide

What is a Primary Source?

A primary source is a document, image, video, or other source that provides a first-hand account of an event, experience, practice, or condition. The most common types of primary sources are those items that were intended to record first-hand accounts, such as diaries, letters, photographs, reports, memos, financial records, inventory lists, data logs, and many others. But primary sources can also include newspaper articles and creative works like fiction, poetry, and art.

Secondary Source

Unlike primary sources, secondary sources describe an event, experience, practice, or condition from a somewhat removed distance. However, the two types of sources are closely related, as secondary sources will inevitably consult and include primary sources. Consider this example: A book of history describing Lincoln's Gettysburg Address and published in 2018 is a secondary source. But it will likely incorporate various primary sources from the time the Gettysburg Address was conceived. These sources will include the speech itself, the letters and reports describing it, as well as any correspondence Lincoln may have left behind describing his intentions with the speech. In this way, a secondary source like this one will craft a coherent narrative that tells story about the speech and its context.

Separating Primary from Secondary

In the example above, it is clear which sources are primary and which is secondary. But it is important to remember that what makes something a primary source is not necessary its form or its features. Rather, what makes something a primary source is its use by the historian or researcher.

To illustrate this point, consider the following example: The book *The History of the Conquest of Mexico* was published in 1839 and written by the famed American historian William H. Prescott. It is a thorough and elegantly written history of the Spanish arrival and rise to dominance in Mesoamerica; and, despite some advances in our understanding of the period, it continues to be read and cited by historians today. But the book is also a product of the nineteenth century. For example, it reflects the anti-Catholic sentiment and condescension toward Spaniards that was commonly held by New England Protestants like Prescott at the time. When we read *The History of the Conquest of Mexico* to learn about the collapse of the Aztec Empire and the accomplishments of Hernán Cortés, we are reading it as a secondary source. But when we read the history to gain insight into the world view of Prescott and how historians in the nineteenth century expressed their prejudices through their scholarship, then we are reading it as a primary source.

Types of Primary Sources

Keeping in mind that some primary sources can also be secondary sources, here is a list of common primary sources. Note that this list is not comprehensive.

General Text Sources:

- Autobiographies and memoirs
- Diaries
- Personal letters
- Business correspondence
- Surveys
- Contemporary newspaper and magazine articles
- Speeches
- Birth certificates
- Property deeds
- Technical reports
- Patents
- Insurance reports

Government Documents:

- Parliamentary (Congressional) reports
- Bills
- Proclamations
- Floor speeches
- Hearings
- Court transcripts and decisions
- Census data
- Tax records

Creative Sources:

- Poetry
- Short stories
- Novels

Image Sources:

- Photographs
- Drawings
- Posters
- Paintings
- Editorial cartoons

Physical artifacts:

- Tools
- Coins
- Clothing
- Furniture
- Jewelry

Digital (or Electronic) Sources:

- Email correspondence
- Websites
- Blogs
- Newsgroups
- Audio recordings
- Video recordings
- Sound recordings

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Questioning a Primary Source

Primary sources can be fountains of information when used correctly. But they don't give up their secrets easily. They must be carefully, deliberately, and comprehensively probed and prodded. The following questions will help guide your exploration of these sources.

- **When was it written or produced?**

Try to be as precise as you can. Many modern and even early modern sources will provide the date. But not all will. You may have to use the context of the source to determine the date.

For example, imagine you came across an American editorial cartoon that depicts the Italian dictator Benito Mussolini in a largely positive light, but there was no date and no indication of which publication it came from. You could use what you know about the history you are researching to determine the date it was written. The fact that it shows Mussolini means it was likely produced after he came to power in Italy and before he was executed, so between 1922 and 1945. But we can narrow it further. As we've said, the cartoon we're scrutinizing depicts Mussolini in a very positive light. In the 1920s, Mussolini was quite popular in the United States. His star began to fall in the 1930s to the point that when WWII started in 1939 his reputation was in tatters. This suggests that the cartoon was likely published during the decade between Mussolini's rise to power and the early years of the Great Depression. Depending on the specific content of the cartoon, we might narrow this even further.

- **Who wrote or produced it?**

Most newspaper and magazine articles will identify the writer or at least the title of the publication. Government documents like court records and tax forms will indicate the specific clerk of court or bureaucratic agency that produced them. If a particular individual or organization can't be identified, use the content of the source to speculate. The following questions will help with this.

- **What was its original intended purpose?**

This can be easy for things like government documents or other bureaucratic products. Tax records are for recording taxes, court transcripts are for recording the ongoings in a courtroom. Additionally, newspaper articles, diaries, letters, and other such sources will often explain their purpose. Finally, the intended purpose of more creative works like novels, poetry, and art can be far more difficult to discern.

- **Who was its original intended audience?**

The intended audience of a diary might be simply the writer itself. Things like letters and other types of correspondence will have a broader but still fairly narrow audience of one

person or group. Company memos are intended for an even broader audience made up of all the employees in a company. Newspaper or magazine articles are directed to their readership and anyone else who comes across it. For things like propaganda posters and television commercials, the audience is even broader, possibly an entire country.

- **What topics does the source cover?**

Think about the subject of the source. If it's an article in a magazine or newspaper the title will give you a clue and the content will elaborate further. If it's a parliamentary debate or hearing, you will have to read the transcripts and explore the context. The subjects of photographs and editorial cartoons may be the easiest to interpret. But even for these you should consider the date of production and the surrounding historical context.

- **Does it make an argument?**

Newspaper editorials, courtroom arguments, court decisions, and parliamentary debates are all intended to be polemical. But arguments don't have to be debates or contentious. Any source that marshals evidence in support of a claim is making an argument. Be sure to recognize this when you find it. It will help you understand and interpret the source.

- **Does the source state facts, opinions, research?**

Polemical sources will naturally marshal facts, analysis, research, polls, and other things. You should note these features. Ask yourself what they suggest about the author of the source and its purpose. Also ask yourself if the writer is leaving things out. If so, think about what those things might be.

- **Does the source challenge or confirm a dominant position?**

With all things, there are orthodox and unorthodox positions. Think about what type of position the source is taking. Is it orthodox and confident, orthodox and defensive, unorthodox and confident, or unorthodox and defensive? Think about how this might reflect the surrounding historical context.

- **What is left unsaid by the source?**

Primary sources are written for specific purposes and at specific times. Unlike secondary sources, they don't often provide all the necessary context and information. For this reason, you should also think about what a source *doesn't* say. This can sometimes be nearly as important as what it does say. For example, assume you are reading some letters from a young Thomas Edison to some of his engineer friends about one of his early inventions. In some letters he provides a number of details; in others he might be more secretive. What might the omissions tell us about Edison and his relationship with these engineers?

- **What surprised you?**

When looking at primary sources, you should make every effort to learn as much as you can about the sources and the authors before you analyze the sources. If done right, much of what you discover will be predictable. But sometimes, sources will surprise you. Consider the following hypothetical example: You are looking into a nineteenth-century religious organization that worked to prevent further industrialization in the United States. You've found a collection of documents where they talk about electrification. But you soon realized that they seem to be encouraging the use of electricity at home and on the streets. This may seem inconsistent at first. And it may be. But it should prompt you to look further to understand why they are being inconsistent. What does it say about their position on industrialization?

Notetaking with Primary Sources

As you explore the primary source and use the questions above to probe and analyze it, you should make careful notes about the source. These notes will help you understand the source itself and understand the source's relationship to other sources, ideas, and the larger context.

For notes to be useful, they should be as organized as possible. This organization can take many different forms. But whatever form you decide to use should be clear and understandable. Here are a few common examples of how notes can be organized.

Note Cards

Traditional note taking was done on note cards, also called index cards. Taking notes on index cards had a number of advantages. They are small (3 x 5 inches) so force note takers to be concise. They are more durable than paper, so can be shuffled and sorted without damaging them. They are of a uniform size, so can be organized in boxes and easily referenced.

Note cards are best for taking notes on a great number of small primary sources like letters, journal entries, and other short documents.

A typical note card will include the following components:

- Source Title
- Source Subject
- Source Date
- Source Author
- Source Summary
- Additional Important Details

Outlines

Outlining a primary source is a useful notetaking tool for long and complex primary sources. These are sources like memoirs, entire diaries, and books. Outlines themselves can take a number of different forms. But, like note cards, the form used should be clear and understandable.

Outlines identify major themes, categories, lists, and other features or sources. And they organize these features in useful ways. A traditional outline will take the following shape:

I. [Large Category or Heading]

A. [Sub-topic 1]

B. [Sub-topic 2]

1. [Sub-sub-topic 1]

2. [Sub-sub-topic 2]

Spreadsheets

The last form of notetaking we'll discuss is less a strategy for notetaking than a platform that will help you organize your notes. Spreadsheets create large tables with an infinite number of cells. Adding details into these cells allows them to be organized and categorized depending on which row and column they are added to.

Spreadsheets are a useful notetaking tool for primary sources that include lots of quantitative data, such as financial documents, scientific calculations, or inventory lists. Such spreadsheets can take quite a lot of time to build. But once they are built, the data can be viewed and manipulated in a way that will make patterns that are otherwise invisible appear. For example, imagine you are exploring the financial documents of a defunct company. There might be decades of financial records. Some would show periods of growth; others might show periods of decline. Entering these values into a spreadsheet would allow the researcher to step back and look at larger trends. How did company do in a particular year or quarter? How did that year or quarter compare to other comparable periods?

Additionally, spreadsheets can be helpful in organizing information you would ordinarily put into note cards. This will help you organize your notes by subject, theme, date, or author. Spreadsheets can be a very powerful tool when exploring many primary sources.

Appendices

Appendix I: Primary Source Worksheets from the National Archives

Use the following worksheets from the National Archives to help analyze primary sources of several types.

Worksheets for Younger Students or English Language Learners

- Photograph (PDF) (HTML)
- Written Document (PDF) (HTML)
- Artifact or Object (PDF) (HTML)
- Poster (PDF) (HTML)
- Map (PDF) (HTML)
- Cartoon (PDF) (HTML)
- Video (PDF) (HTML)
- Sound Recording (PDF) (HTML)

Worksheets for Intermediate or Secondary Students

- Photograph (PDF) (HTML)
- Written Document (PDF) (HTML)
- Artifact (PDF) (HTML)
- Poster (PDF) (HTML)
- Map (PDF) (HTML)
- Cartoon (PDF) (HTML)
- Video (PDF) (HTML)
- Sound Recording (PDF) (HTML)

Worksheets for Advanced Students

- Written Document (PDF)
- Photograph (PDF)
- Cartoon (PDF)
- Poster (PDF)
- Map (PDF)
- Artifact (PDF)
- Motion Picture (PDF)
- Sound Recording (PDF)

Appendix II: Common Sources of Primary Sources

The following links will take you to a number of large online collections of primary sources. There are many more out there. It's important to remember, also, that most primary sources remain offline. They fill the shelves, halls, and boxes of hundreds of thousands of archives around the world. Many of these may never be digitized. But to get started on your primary source hunt, use the following links.

United States: Governmental

- American Presidency Project
- Landmark Supreme Court Cases
- Library of Congress
- National Archives and Records Administration

United States: Library Collections

- Digital Public Library of America
- New York Public Library Digital Collection

United States: Books and Periodicals

- Making of America
- Hathitrust.org
- Chronicling America from Library of Congress

United States: Various

- Calisphere
- The Founders' Constitution
- Library of Congress American Memory: Historical Collections for the National Digital Library
- Library of Congress Prints and Photographs
- 100 Milestone Documents
  Online Archive of California
- Smithsonian Institution Libraries: Digital Collections

Europe and the World

- OAIster
- The Avalon Project: Documents in Law, History and Diplomacy
- EuroDocs: Online Sources for European History
- Hanover Historical Texts Collection
- Perseus Digital Library

- The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database
- United Nations Treaty Collection
- National Library of France
- National Library of Spain
- Rjiksmuseum