

PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SOURCES

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Students and researchers now have greater access to primary source materials for historical research than ever before. The traditional use of sources available in print and microfilm continues to be the foundation for research, but in some cases documents, letters, maps, photographs of ancient artifacts and other primary material are available online in different formats from free websites or subscription services on the internet. Users of primary sources have always needed to examine their sources critically, but now with the proliferation of electronic resources from a wide variety of web site producers, evaluation is more important than ever before. Users of web resources must now consider the authenticity of documents, what person or organization is the internet provider, and whether the electronic version serves their needs. This brief guide is designed to provide students and researchers with information to help them evaluate the internet sources and the quality of primary materials that can be found online.

What are Primary Sources?

Primary sources are original records created at the time historical events occurred or well after events in the form of memoirs and oral histories. Primary sources may include letters, manuscripts, diaries, journals, newspapers, speeches, interviews, memoirs, documents produced by government agencies such as Congress or the Office of the President, photographs, audio recordings, moving pictures or video recordings, research data, and objects or artifacts such as works of art or ancient roads, buildings, tools, and weapons. These sources serve as the raw material to interpret the past, and when they are used along with previous interpretations by historians, they provide the resources necessary for historical research.



What are Secondary Sources

Secondary sources offer an analysis or a restatement of primary sources. They often attempt to describe or explain primary sources. Some secondary sources not only analyze primary sources, but use them to argue a contention or to persuade the reader to hold a certain opinion. . It is generally at least one step

removed from the event. Examples include scholarly or popular books and articles, reference books, and textbooks.

Examples of secondary sources include: dictionaries, encyclopedias, textbooks, and books and articles that interpret or review research works.

Examples of primary and secondary sources:

	Primary Source	Secondary Source
Art	Original artwork	Article critiquing the piece of art
History	Slave diary	Book about the Underground Railroad
Literature	Poem	Treatise on a particular genre of poetry
Political Science	Treaty	Essay on Native American land rights
Theatre	Videotape of a performance	Biography of a playwright

Evaluating Primary Source Web Sites

Before relying on the information provided by a website, examine and understand the purpose of the website. While the purpose might not affect the accuracy of the primary source material it contains, it might indicate that the material has been altered or manipulated in some way to change or influence its meaning. Sometimes sites use primary source material to persuade the reader to a particular point of view, distorting the contents in obvious or subtle ways. Also, sites can use primary source material haphazardly, without appropriately choosing, inspecting, or citing the work.

In general, look for websites with a non-biased, balanced approach to presenting sources. Websites produced by educational or governmental institution often are more reliable than personal websites, but government sites may be subject to propaganda.

Sources for this presentation:

<http://www.lib.washington.edu/subject/History/RUSA/>

<http://www.uidaho.edu/special-collections/Other.Repositories.html>

<http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/TeachingLib/Guides/PrimarySources.html#secondary>

<http://www.bgsu.edu/colleges/library/infosrv/lue/primary.html>

<http://www.primarysource.org/>