

UCLA INSTITUTE ON Primary Resources



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WHAT ARE PRIMARY RESOURCES?

Primary resources provide firsthand evidence of historical events. They are generally unpublished materials such as manuscripts, photographs, maps, artifacts, audio and video recordings, oral histories, postcards, and posters. In some instances, published materials can also be viewed as primary materials for the period in which they were written. In contrast, secondary materials, such as textbooks, synthesize and interpret primary materials. Following are excerpts and examples from a variety of explanations provided by institutions that utilize primary resources.

The Library of Congress' Learning Page is part of the American Memory site, which is designed to help teachers, students and life-long learners use the American Memory digital collections from the Library of Congress.

Primary sources are defined as "actual records that have survived from the past, such as letters, photographs, articles of clothing." In contrast, secondary sources are accounts of the past created by people writing about events sometime after they happened.

For example, your history textbook is a secondary source. Someone wrote most of your textbook long after historical events took place. Your textbook may also include some primary sources, such as direct quotes from people living in the past or excerpts from historical documents.

People living in the past left many clues about their lives. These clues include both primary and secondary sources in the form of books, personal papers, government documents, letters, oral accounts, diaries, maps, photographs, reports, novels and short stories, artifacts, coins, stamps and many other things. Historians call all of these clues together the historical record.

• <http://cweb2loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/index.html>

The Ohio Historical Society defines primary sources as a "source created by people who actually saw or participated in an event and recorded that event or their reactions to it immediately after the event. In contrast, secondary source is defined as a "source created by someone either not present when the event took place or removed by time from the event."

• <http://www.ohiohistory.org/resource/teachers/primary.html#definitions>

The Teaching Library at the University of California at Berkeley supports undergraduate education by providing services and resources that serve to bridge the gap between the classroom and The Library's information resources. The Teaching Library supplements the subject-oriented training received in the classroom with instruction in information resources and search techniques. The Teaching Library's publication, "Library Research using Primary Sources," states that primary sources enable the researcher to get as close as possible to the truth of what actually happened during an historical event or time period. Primary sources are the evidence left behind by participants or observers. Examples of primary sources include:

- 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;
- Records of organizations and agencies of government;
- Published materials written at the time of the event;
- Photographs, audio recordings, moving pictures, video recordings documenting what happened;
- Artifacts of all kinds; and
- Research reports in the sciences and social sciences.

A secondary source is a work that interprets or analyzes an historical event or phenomenon. Examples of secondary sources include textbooks and encyclopedias. The website provides tips for locating primary source material and offers an excellent bibliography.

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

The common thread running through the examples is that primary sources of material can be in any form, and are a source of direct evidence that describes or documents an historical event from the perspective of someone who was there. Students should be cautioned to examine primary resources critically to determine the author's perspective. As Amanda Podany (1997) has written in the History Social Science Framework for California Public Schools, "Most primary sources reflect their author's particular point of view; this does not make them less valuable. The reader simply needs to be aware of the author's perspective and to avoid taking the source at face value." In contrast, secondary sources are those resources that analyze an event and are produced by someone who was not present when the event occurred.

In addition to the websites listed above, there are many more online sites where primary resources and information about utilizing primary resources in the classroom can be found. Please see the "Additional Resources" page of our website.

If you would like information about the programs offered by the Institute on Primary Resources or an application, please contact the Institute on Primary Resources at ipr@ucla.edu or 310-206-4940.

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