

Primary Sources: What Are They?

National History Day, an annual program for elementary and secondary students designed to “teach essential historical literacy that motivates students to secure the future of democracy,” defines primary sources as follows:

What is a primary source? Primary sources are materials directly related to a topic by time or participation. These materials include letters, speeches, diaries, newspaper articles from the time, oral history interviews, documents, photographs, artifacts, or anything else that provides firsthand accounts about a person or event.

Some materials might be considered primary sources for one topic but not for another. For example, a newspaper article about D-Day (which was June 6, 1944) written in June 1944 was likely written by a participant or eyewitness and would be a primary source; an article about D-Day written in June 2001 probably was not written by an eyewitness or participant and would not be a primary source.

Similarly, Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, delivered soon after the 1863 battle, is a primary source for the Civil War, but a speech given on the 100th anniversary of the battle of Gettysburg in 1963 is not a primary source for the Civil War. If, however, the topic was how Americans commemorate the Civil War, then the 100th anniversary speech would be a primary source for that topic. If there’s any doubt about whether a source should be listed as primary or secondary, you should explain in your annotated bibliography why you chose to categorize it as you did.

READING WRITING IN THE DISCIPLINES

Students should consider the following locations when looking for primary source material:

- Public and College Libraries
- Local and State Historical Societies
- Museums
- State Archives
- Corporate Archives
- Town and County Historians
- Town Hall Records
- Town Planning Offices
- Schools
- Churches
- Community Groups, such as the Veterans of Foreign Wars, Daughters of the American Revolution, Ethnic Organizations, etc.
- Community Residents

Here are some common questions about primary sources:

Are interviews with experts primary sources? No, an interview with an expert (a professor of Civil War history, for example) is not a primary source, UNLESS that expert actually lived through and has firsthand knowledge of the events being described.

If I find a quote from a historical figure in my textbook or another secondary source and I use the quote in my project, should I list it as a primary source? No, quotes from historical figures which are found in secondary sources are not considered primary sources. The author of the book has processed the quotation, selecting it from the original source. Without seeing the original source for yourself, you don't know if the quotation is taken out of context, what else was in the source, what the context was, etc.