

What are primary sources & why should you use them in your research papers?

Primary sources are the raw materials of history. They are firsthand resources created by eyewitnesses — people who actually see or participate in an event and record it and their reactions to it. Primary sources have not been edited, rewritten, or otherwise distorted by another person.

In *Finding History*, Christine Bombaro writes: “An effective research paper should incorporate as many relevant primary sources as possible in order to place the events under consideration in their appropriate historical context and to gain insight on historical issues from those who lived through them. Primary sources will give you a truer sense of a past event than any description by a secondary source could. . . . Using primary sources will help you develop your own opinions about historical questions and prevent you from simply restating the conclusions of other historians.”

Evaluating primary sources is critical. Ask:

- Who created this source?
- Why was this source created?
- Who is the intended audience?
- How do the ideas and values in the source differ from those of our time?
- How does this source compare to other primary sources of the era?

We're #1! Primary sources & where to find them



Other types of sources

Secondary sources analyze and interpret primary sources. Examples: Magazine articles, biographies, books, reviews, textbooks, lit crit

Tertiary sources compile data on a topic. Examples: Encyclopedias, dictionaries, manuals, databases, almanacs, guidebooks, library catalogs

Are primary sources always reliable?

No. A primary source gives ONE person's perspective on a historical event or period.

While primary sources may or may not tell the truth, one source is not likely the “whole truth.” Different people participating in the same event or same era had different experiences — for example, a knight and a serf in the Middle Ages viewed and would have described social issues very differently.

People view events through a window colored by their age, culture, education, gender, political beliefs, religion, and time period. Two people experiencing the same event could have different perspectives. For instance, a police officer and a protestor may tell very different stories about the same event.

Good historians collect primary sources, compare them with other sources, and use the lens of history to set an event in the context of the time period.

One stop, many links

<https://is.gd/primarysource>

This web page offers links to reliable online collections of primary sources.

Glendale Community College Library, 10/2019

Form 25-0 DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE-BUREAU OF THE CENSUS
 FIFTEENTH CENSUS OF THE UNITED STATES: 1930
 POPULATION SCHEDULE

State: *District of Columbia* Incorporated place: *Washington City* Enumeration District No.: *2* Sheet No.: *11 A*
 County: *District of Columbia* Ward of city: *Block No. 380* Supervisor's District No.: *692*
 Enumerated by me on: *April 12, 1930, G. A. L. L. L.*

PLACE OF ABODE	NAME	RELATION	HOME DATA	PERSONAL DESCRIPTION	EDUCATION	PLACE OF BIRTH	MOTHER TONGUE OR OTHER LANGUAGE OF HOUSEHOLD		CITIZENSHIP, ETC.	OCCUPATION AND INDUSTRY		EMPLOYMENT	VETERANS		
							PERSON	MOTHER		CODE	INDUSTRY			CODE	STATUS
1	311 65 07	Reed, George	Head	W 35 M 22	Yes	Virginia	Virginia	Virginia	24	Yes	Farmer	Farmer	1111 W Ver	16	1
2		Reed, Mary A	Wife	W 32 M 20	Yes	Virginia	Virginia	Virginia	24	Yes	Farmer	Farmer	1111 W Ver	16	1
3		Reed, Charles M	Son	M W 32 M 10	Yes	Virginia	Virginia	Virginia	24	Yes	Farmer	Farmer	1111 W Ver	16	1
4		Reed, Robert	Son	M W 62 M 20	Yes	Virginia	Virginia	Virginia	24	Yes	Farmer	Farmer	1111 W Ver	16	1
5		Reed, John	Son	M W 62 M 20	Yes	Virginia	Virginia	Virginia	24	Yes	Farmer	Farmer	1111 W Ver	16	1
6		Reed, James A	Son	M W 62 M 20	Yes	Virginia	Virginia	Virginia	24	Yes	Farmer	Farmer	1111 W Ver	16	1
7		Reed, Frank	Son	M W 62 M 20	Yes	Virginia	Virginia	Virginia	24	Yes	Farmer	Farmer	1111 W Ver	16	1
8		Reed, George	Son	M W 62 M 20	Yes	Virginia	Virginia	Virginia	24	Yes	Farmer	Farmer	1111 W Ver	16	1
9	432 46 78	Reed, George	Son	M W 62 M 20	Yes	Virginia	Virginia	Virginia	24	Yes	Farmer	Farmer	1111 W Ver	16	1

Image: semantic scholar.org

Primary sources databases

- Historical Periodical Collection (AAS)
- ProQuest Historic American Periodicals
- Gale News Vault (includes 19th Century American Newspapers)
- Historical Index to *The New York Times*
- EBSCO Magazine Archives
- Women's Magazine Archive

How do you find these databases? Start at the library's home page (lib.gccaz.edu/lmc). Click the **Library Databases** link, located to the left of the search box. Scroll down to the **Historical Publications** category and start exploring the databases.

Working at home? Use your MEID and password to log into the databases.

Note: Many other library databases, especially history-, medical-, and science-focused ones, include primary sources. In the **History** category, take a look at US History in Context, World History in Context, and Salem History. Explore other categories and use what you've learned about primary sources to identify them.

Need help? Ask!

Visit or phone a librarian at a Reference Desk
GCC Main — 623-845-3112
GCC North — 623-888-7112

Ask a Librarian is a 24/7 service! - Use the chat box on the Library's home page

Primary sources: Examples

Primary sources offer firsthand evidence about an event, person, object, or artwork.

Letters, diaries, memoirs, autobiographies, first-person news coverage, historical and legal documents, eyewitness accounts, photos, experimental and statistical data, audio and video recordings, artifacts, patents, speeches, interviews, art, surveys, oral histories, dissertations, and Internet communications are all primary sources.

Search the library catalog for book series focused on primary sources

- Defining Documents of American History (some available as ebooks)
- Defining Documents of World History (some available as ebooks)
- Milestone Documents (some available as ebooks)
- Voices of an Era

Looking for a specific format? Add these words to your library catalog and database searches

- Sources (ex. Civil rights - Sources or Medieval sources)
- Correspondence (ex. Civil War - Correspondence or 19th century - Correspondence)
- Diaries (ex. Confederate - Diaries)
- Personal narratives (ex. Holocaust - Personal narratives)
- Facsimiles (this means exact copies) (ex. New York Times - Facsimiles)
- Interviews (ex. Refugees - Interviews)
- Pictorial works (ex. West (U.S.) - History - Pictorial works)
- Notebooks, sketchbooks, etc.
- Speeches
- Caricatures and cartoons (ex. - United States - Politics and government - 2001-2009 - Caricatures and cartoons)