

What is a primary source?

Primary sources enable the researcher to get as close as possible to what actually happened during a historical event or time period. Primary sources were either created during the time period being studied, or, in rare cases, created at a later date by a participant in the events being studied (as in the case of memoirs or autobiographies). Primary sources often reflect the individual viewpoint of a participant or observer.

A few examples of primary sources include:

Newspaper articles	Journals or diaries
Magazines	Speeches
Photographs	Manuscripts
Bills of sale/receipts	Official/legal documents
Maps/blueprints/drawings	High school yearbooks
Movies/films made during the period	Advertisements
Public opinion polls/surveys	Autobiographies
Census records	Government or business correspondence
Audio/video recordings	3-dimensional artifacts
Letters, postcards, or personal correspondence	Political cartoons
Telephone/city directories	Land deeds
Musical scores/song lyrics	Minutes or recordings of meetings
Original creative works of art: poetry, drama, painting, literature, etc.	

A secondary source is a summary of history based on upon the historical record drawn from artifacts and primary sources. Examples of secondary sources are history textbooks, documentaries and encyclopedias.

For decades, history teachers and educators have advocated the use of primary sources within the classroom. The instructional advantages are numerous. Among them is the power to unlock for students a genuine interest in history, to stimulate thinking, and break down judgements of the past.

According to the Library of Congress, it is difficult for students to understand that we all participate in making history every day throughout the course of our lives. We leave behind primary and secondary source documentation scholars years from now may examine as a record of the past. It is this immediacy of first person accounts of events that is most compelling to students and is what makes history come alive during their studies.

Adapted from: Tally, Bill, *History Goes Digital: Teaching with On-line Primary Sources*. 1 February 1997. http://www.techlearning.com/db_area/archives/WCFarchives/tally1.htm