Primary and Secondary Sources

Primary Sources

Primary sources are original documents that contain firsthand accounts and were created contemporaneously with the events they describe. Primary sources exist in a large range of formats, including text, videos, photographs, letters, illustrations, maps, census information, and more. Primary sources may include both published materials (like newspapers, magazine articles, and plays) as well as unpublished materials.

Why might you use primary sources? Primary sources provide you with direct resources about your topic. They can offer a variety of perspectives for you to analyze, to understand a particular event or time period more completely.

Things to keep in mind: When reviewing a primary source, be sure to critically analyze its intended purpose, its contents, and the way in which it was written. It can be difficult to distinguish between fact, opinion, and propaganda. Primary accounts can also be incomplete or lack valuable context. To address these concerns, check if other sources substantiate the information presented in your source.

Secondary Sources

Secondary sources discuss or interpret primary sources and do not reflect firsthand experience. They mainly consist of published materials.

Why might you use secondary sources? Secondary sources will describe or explain the value of a primary resource or multiple primary resources.

Things to keep in mind: Secondary sources will reflect their current critical attitudes and scholarship, which may change substantially over time.

Analyzing whether a research material is a primary or secondary source will help you to assess the value of a particular resource to your research project. Some sources may contain a blend of primary and secondary points of view. For instance, a documentary might contain a personal account of a specific issue (primary) and may also analyze someone else’s experience of the same issue (secondary). It is your job as the researcher to distinguish between the two.
Where can you find primary sources?

Select Fordham University Libraries Databases
A few databases with primary source documents include:
- Accessible Archives
- American Antiquarian Society Historical Periodicals Collection
- Eighteenth Century Collections Online
- LUNA Commons
- Original Sources
Plus many other subject-specific databases. View the Databases list online for more.

OneSearch
Choose “Primary sources” as source type from the left-side toolbar.

Websites
Internet History Sourcebooks Project
https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/Halsall/index.asp

Library of Congress Primary Source Sets
http://www.loc.gov/teachers/classroommaterials/primarysourcesets/

Archive Grid
https://beta.worldcat.org/archivegrid/

Fordham University Libraries Archives
Collection strengths include Fordham University history, and the Bronx and New York City.

Select Government and Educational Resources
- US Census
- Library of Congress: Primary Documents in American History
- Library of Congress: Declassified Documents Reference System
- Central Intelligence Agency: Foreign Broadcast Information Service
- Office of the Historian: Foreign Relations of the United States
- ProQuest Congressional Publications (via Fordham Libraries website)
- US Congressional Serial Set
- National Archives
- DocsTeach
- Spartacus Educational
- Avalon Project