

USING HISTORICAL SOURCES

Historians get their information from two different kinds of sources: primary and secondary. *Primary sources* are first hand sources; *secondary sources* are second-hand sources. For example, suppose there had been a car accident. The description of the accident which a witness gives to the police is a primary source because it comes from someone actually there at the time. The story in the newspaper the next day is a secondary source because the reporter who wrote the story did not actually witness it. The reporter is presenting a way of understanding the accident or an *interpretation*.

Using Primary Sources

Primary sources are interesting to read for their own sake: they give us first hand, you-are-there insights into the past. They are also the most important tools an historian has for developing an understanding of an event. Primary sources serve as the evidence an historian uses in developing an interpretation and in building an argument to support that interpretation. You will be using primary sources not only to help you better understand what went on, but also as evidence as you answer questions and develop arguments about the past.

I. Primary Sources.

Primary Sources do not speak for themselves, they have to be interpreted. That is, we can't always immediately understand what a primary source means, especially if it is from a culture significantly different from our own. It is therefore necessary to try to understand what it means and to figure out what the source can tell us about the past.

A. Examples of Primary Sources

- Personal Records: letters, emails, diaries, photographs and daily planners.
- Vital Records: birth certificates, death certificates, and marriage licenses
- Original Documents: literary manuscripts, institutional records (grades)
- Mass Media: newspaper and magazine articles, published photographs, recordings of television and radio broadcasts, sheet music and music recorded for mass distribution, advertisements, books, and magazines.
- Artifacts: coins, items of clothing, tools, commemorative plaques, furniture, or really anything.
- Recorded histories: oral histories, photographs
- Maps

B. Value of Primary Sources

- Primary sources are what remain from the past. Aside from human memory and the unrecorded passing down of information from generation to generation, histories based upon primary sources are really the only way the current generation can hope to understand what happened before.
- Those who are not professional historians have the option of relying on others to find this evidence from the past and interpret it. But many people find it more fun and interesting to have direct contact with the historical records themselves, because they value learning about

historical events in the words and images of the direct participants. Besides, everything worth finding out about hasn't been written in a history book or journal— not by a long shot!

C. Challenges of using Primary Sources.

- In contrast to how many of us are accustomed to reading secondary sources, when you use primary sources you have to start by asking a lot of questions about the source itself. It's important to consider who created the document and for what purpose, among other things.

Using Secondary Sources

There is a strong temptation in a history class to believe that the answers to all the questions are found in the textbook and that the object of the course is to learn the textbook. While it is certainly possible to approach this course in that manner, you will not learn as much since you will be a passive recipient of knowledge, rather than an active participant in the learning process, and it will actually mean more work for you since you will be doing more than you need to.

I. Secondary Sources.

A secondary source interprets and analyzes primary sources. These sources are one or more steps removed from the event. Secondary sources may have pictures, quotes or graphics of primary sources in them. Many times secondary sources are persuasive or argumentative in nature.

A. Examples of Secondary Sources.

- Publications: textbooks, magazine articles, histories, criticisms, commentaries, encyclopedias

Use a secondary source if you need to find a particular piece of information quickly. You might need to know, for example, when Ghengis Khan lived, in what year the cotton gin was invented or the population of London in 1648.

B. As a source of background material.

If your interests are focused on one subject, but you need to know something about what else was going on at that time or what happened earlier, you can use a secondary source to find the background material you might need. For example, if you are writing about Luther's 95 Theses, you should use a secondary source to help you understand the Catholic Church in the Renaissance.

C. As an interpretation.

Since the facts do not speak for themselves, it is necessary for the historian to make give them some shape and to put them in an order people can understand. This is called an interpretation. Many secondary sources provide not only information, but a way of making sense of that information. You should use a secondary source if you wish to understand how an historian makes sense of a particular event, person, or trend.