DEFINITIONS OF PRIMARY SOURCES

**Primary Sources** are first-hand accounts of an event, a life, a moment in time. They are in their original form (diaries, letters, photos, etc.) usually without explanation or interpretation. **Secondary sources** are often written some time after an event happened by people who were not present when the event occurred. Secondary sources are based on a variety of other sources and can include books, journal articles, textbooks, and reference sources.

Historian Mary Lynn Rampolla defines [primary sources] as “materials produced by people or groups directly involved in the event or topic under consideration.” . . . Primary sources can include not just written documents like letters or diaries but also the material remains (e.g., tools, furniture, art, architecture, music) of a specific time and place. Primary sources are the essential building blocks for the historian's reconstruction of a moment in time.

WHY USE PRIMARY SOURCES?

From Library of Congress American Memory Collection: [http://memory.loc.gov/learn/educators/handouts/](http://memory.loc.gov/learn/educators/handouts/)

**To develop critical thinking skills:** Primary sources are snippets of history. They are incomplete and often come without context. They require students to be analytical, to examine sources thoughtfully, and to determine what else they need to know to make inferences from the materials.

*A high school student states, “I learned that in order to do history, one must be objective and be able to look at a puzzle of historical events and put them together in order.”*

**To understand that all history is local:** Local history projects require students to “tell their own stories” about familiar people, events, and places. Memories from an adult’s perspective provide a rich glimpse of history that is not available in a textbook. What evolves is the sense that world history is also personal family history, which provides a compelling context for student understanding.

*An elementary/middle school teacher reports that “finding information about topics that are of importance to our local history is invaluable. Students are excited by the fact that our local history is archives nationally. This gives their immediate cultural area importance in their eyes.”*

**3. To acquire empathy for the human condition:** Primary sources help students relate personally to events of the past, gaining a deeper understanding of history as a series of human events.

*A high school teacher reported that, “In sharing the Whitman hospital letters, I clearly saw a sheen of tears in students’ eyes and noted an avid interest in Civil War soldiers as ‘people,’ not simply as pallid historical figures.”*

**4. To consider different points of view in analysis:** In analyzing primary sources, students move from concrete observations and facts to inferences about the materials. “Point of view” is one of the most important inferences that can be drawn. What is the intent of the speaker, of the photographer, of the musician? How does that color one’s interpretation or understanding of the evidence?

*A high school teacher states, “Discovering that two people may see the same primary source differently creates a kind of dissonance that opens up the meaning of the source and creates new understanding in learners.” Arguing about the past makes it more personal, more relevant!*

**5. To understand the continuum of history:** Students come to understand that we all participate in making history every day, leaving behind primary source documentation that scholars years hence may examine as a record of “the past.” The immediacy of first-person accounts of events is compelling to most students.

*A teacher comments: “Comparisons of events of the past to events our students are engaged in daily helps to bring ‘history’ to the present and make it ‘live’ for our students.”*
Sources for Primary Research

Note: Provenance (chain of ownership) must be established for personal belongings. Date and authority of sources must be established, particularly in the case of items marked with an asterisk.

- advertisements
- advertising brochures
- applications
- audio recordings
- autobiographies*
- autographs
- automobile titles
- award certificates
- bank records
- Bible records
- bills of sale
- biographies*
- birth announcements
- birth certificates
- blueprints
- business records
- calendars
- cemetery records
- census records
- checks
- check registers
- children’s clothing
- christening records
- Christmas letters
- church certificates
- church bulletins/records
- clinical case reports
- clothing
- coins
- Congressional records
- contracts
- court records
- credit card receipts
- daybooks
- death certificates
- deeds
- diaries & journals
- diplomas
- directions
- divorce papers
- driver’s licenses
- drawings & paintings
- e-mail
- election certificates
- embroidery
- ephemera (menus, tickets)
- fashion artifacts
- field notes
- films
- financial records & audits
- fishing licenses
- folk songs
- furniture
- government documents
- gradebooks
- graduation programs
- greeting cards
- Halloween costumes
- hand-crafted articles
- handbills
- hardware & tools
- historic documents
- home movies
- hunting licenses
- ID badges
- insurance certificates
- interviews*
- jewelry
- kitchen tools & gadgets
- land records
- legal documents
- letters
- magazines*
- maps, charts, diagrams
- marriage announcements
- marriage licenses
- medals
- medical records
- membership cards
- memoranda
- military records
- minutes of meetings
- mortgages
- music scores
- news film footage
- newsletters
- newspapers*
- notebooks
- operator’s certificates
- oral history*
- organizational charts
- parish records
- patents
- personnel folders
- photographs
- play programs
- poetry
- political campaign items
- political cartoons
- posters
- postcards
- pottery
- pre-nuptial agreements
- press releases
- professional licenses
- programs of events
- quilts
- receipts
- report cards
- reports*
- recipe cards & publications
- research notes & files
- sales slips & receipts
- schedules
- school assignments/tests
- school transcripts
- scrapbooks
- sermons
- sheet music
- shipping documents
- shoes, boots, hats
- shopping lists
- sketchbooks
- song lyrics
- speeches
- spirituals
- stamps
- tax records
- team statistics
- telegrams
- telephone memos
- theatre programs
- timetables
- titles to vehicles
- tombstones
- tools
- toys and games
- trading cards
- transportation records
- travel & history brochures
- trophies
- video recordings
- weapons & equipment
- wills
- writing implements (pens, nibs, inkwells, etc.)
- yearbooks
Reading Historically . . . Thinking Like an Historian

Historians do the following:

A. Sourcing – analyzing the resource: Who said so? Where did this come from?
   1. Teach students to stop and source before reading!
   2. Consider a document’s attribution (the name of the author or editor and how the document came into being) before doing anything else:
      a. Read the headnote, if any;
      b. Look at all the source information, including date, publisher;
      c. Note the attribution, if any;
      d. Consider the genre (book, diary, newspaper, speech);
      e. Set it in historic context – time and region;
      f. Verify provenance (records documenting authenticity or history of ownership);
      g. Study the Table of Contents and Index.

B. Contextualizing – imagining the setting, making it visual
   1. Create a picture in your head: what did the original scene look like?
   2. The available technology affects the way information is produced and delivered – What things were different in those days? How might that matter?
   3. Who are the others thinking and writing on this subject – the people talking about it?

C. Corroborating – cross-checking: Who else says so?
   1. Inter-textual reading – looking for corroboration/confirmation.
   2. What do other sources say?
   3. Where would we find other perspectives on this issue? (e.g., after the destruction of the USS Maine, what was on the front page in Havana? in Madrid?)
   4. How does other material support, oppose, or extend your understanding of the subject?

D. Close reading – bias, tone, implied meaning: What does it say? How does it say it?

Ruminations on textbooks:

1. History books speak with such authority, they suggest that their analysis of history is not, in fact, only one of many possible interpretations. Teachers need to become comfortable with uncertainty – you don’t have to be the only authority in the classroom. It’s perfectly okay to say, “I don’t know.” Students are delighted to hear that experts disagree. Let your class get into the fray themselves after consulting original documents.

2. Every text is the product of a human voice. All are biased in some way. All are incomplete: their very attempts to become unbiased make them incomplete; their efforts to meet national standards make them incomplete; their efforts not to offend anyone make them incomplete!

3. Textbooks tend to repeat information from earlier textbooks – even historical myths – rather than to draw from current research. Contemporary historical thinking rarely makes its way into textbooks, which rarely admit that any controversy exists in the interpretation of historic figures and events.

Adapted from an exercise by Wineburg, Martin, & Monte-Sano – Stanford Education Group
Helping Students Begin to Analyze Primary Sources

Author
1. Who created the source and why?
2. Was this record created through an impulsive act, a routine transaction, or a deliberate process? Is it an officially-sanctioned version of the event?
3. Did the recorder have firsthand knowledge of the event or report what others saw?
4. Did the author participate in the event or watch from the sidelines?
5. Are there any factors to suggest the author’s motivation for recording this event? For example, was he a neutral party, or did he have opinions or interests that might have influenced his interpretation of the events? Can you identify bias?
6. What qualifications does the author have that would make you trust his testimony (e.g., research the author’s educational background, experience, previous writings.)

Date of Publication
1. When was the source produced/published?
2. Was the information recorded during the event, immediately after the event, or after some time had passed? (Be as specific as possible about determining the amount of time between the event and the record.)
3. Is this the first version or edition of this piece? (Note: later versions may be revised.)
4. Did the author return to this event in later writings?

Intended Purpose and Audience
1. Was the source intended to be public or private? For example, did the recorder produce the source for personal use, for a specific individual, or for a wider audience?
2. Is the author addressing a particular audience or type of audience? Is the information aimed at a specialized or a general audience? What evidence supports your answer?
3. Did the recorder intend to inform or persuade others? (Make conjectures about whether the author intended to be objective or persuasive. For example, does he use selective information or choose terms that are likely to arouse emotion in the reader?)
4. Who would be most likely to disagree with this version of events?

Objective Reasoning
1. Would you say this information is fact, opinion, or propaganda? (Facts can usually be verified; opinions, even if based on factual information, are merely the author’s interpretation of facts. Skilled writers can make it difficult to tell the difference.)
2. Is the information supported by evidence or by other witnesses? Can you identify any errors or omissions? What might the author have omitted?

C. Coverage
1. Does the work update other sources, substantiate other materials you have read, or add new information? Have you searched for a variety of viewpoints?
2. Double-check: Is the material primary or secondary in nature? How do you know?

Primary sources expose students to multiple perspectives on great issues of the past and present. History, after all, deals with matters that were furiously debated by the participants. Interpretations of the past are debated as well, among historians, policy makers, politicians, and ordinary citizens. By working with primary sources, students become involved in these debates – they can begin to think like historians!
When a student asks, “Why does/How can history produce such different versions of the same event? Aren’t facts facts?” . . . try one of these exercises or discussions:

1. Have every student write a description of what happened in class yesterday.
2. Set up a dramatic situation in the classroom (for example, another teacher bursts into the room and starts an argument with you, then storms out.) Ask the students to write what they saw and heard. Better yet, wait a day before you ask.
3. Read and discuss the poem “The Blindmen and the Elephant” by John Godfrey Saxe (below). Although this is based on a story that appears in many different cultures and was intended to portray people’s different perceptions of God, it works equally well to demonstrate varying points of view toward any historical event.
4. Think of situations from the students’ own lives where there might be more than one version of the same event – for example, if you have a fight with one of your brothers or sisters, do you both tell your mom the same story? Would you give your father and your best friend the same description of the party you went to on Saturday night?

The Blindmen and the Elephant
by John Godfrey Saxe

It was six men of Hindustan
To learning much inclined,
Who went to see the Elephant
(Tho’ all of them were blind)
That each by observation
Might satisfy the mind.

The first approached the Elephant
And happening to fall
Against his broad & sturdy side
At once began to bawl:
"Bless me, it seems the Elephant
Is very like a wall."

The second, feeling of his tusk,
Cried, "Ho! What have we here
So very round & smooth & sharp?
To me 'tis mighty clear
This wonder of an Elephant
Is very like a spear."

The third approached the animal,
And happening to take
The squirming trunk within his hands,
Then boldly up and spake:
"I see," quoth he, "the Elephant
Is very like a snake."

The Fourth reached out an eager hand,
And felt about the knee.
"What most this wondrous beast is like
Is mighty plain," quoth he;
"'Tis clear enough the Elephant
Is very like a tree!"

The Fifth, who chanced to touch the ear,
Said: "E'en the blindest man
Can tell what this resembles most;
Deny the fact who can,
This marvel of an Elephant
Is very like a fan!"

The Sixth no sooner had begun
About the beast to grope, /Than seizing on the swinging tail
That fell within his scope,
"I see," quoth he, "the Elephant
Is very like a rope!"

And so these men of Hindustan
Disputed loud and long,
Each in his own opinion
Exceeding stiff and strong,
Tho’ each was partly in the right
And all were in the wrong.

So oft in theologic wars,
The disputants, I ween,
Rail on in utter ignorance
Of what each other mean,
And prate about an Elephant
Not one of them has seen!