

What Are Primary Sources?

Primary sources are accounts/objects created either at the time a historical event occurred, or later, when eyewitnesses chose to document their experiences. Primary sources enable students and historians to understand the past from the perspective of the people who lived at a particular time. While sources created closest to an event or time period will be more meaningful and have a more powerful impact than those created at a later time, individual sources do not tell a story. Students of history must interpret and explain multiple sources in order to bring a story to life.

There are many kinds of primary sources. Some of the more common ones are listed below. Each type of source has its strengths and limitations, and some sources are more useful than others depending on the topic under study. As students analyze primary sources, they should determine the usefulness of each type of source in the context of what they are studying.

- ▶ **Public Records:** government documents and publications, court records, wills, tax records, census reports, laws, speeches, and legislation
- ▶ **Personal Documents:** diaries, letters, e-mail, correspondence, oral histories, memoirs, household management records
- ▶ **Artifacts and Relics:** the material culture of life: furniture, tools, machines, clothing, utensils
- ▶ **Visual Images and Works of Art:** photographs, posters, paintings, drawings, engravings, icons, sculptures, pottery, and weaving
- ▶ **Architecture, City Plans, and Maps:** neighborhood changes, developments in cities, landscape changes, designs of buildings and homes
- ▶ **Media:** television news, radio broadcasts, newspaper articles, audio and video recordings
- ▶ **Literary Works:** selections from novels, essays, poems, plays, short stories, or religious works
- ▶ **Organizational Records:** financial documents and minutes together with other records of businesses, charities, and civic clubs
- ▶ **Research Data:** recorded factual material commonly accepted in the scientific and social science communities that validates the findings of scientists and social scientists

(Some of the categories came from this site: <http://libguides.lib.miamioh.edu/content.php?pid=61989&sid=455985>)