Using Primary and Secondary Sources: A Practice Tutorial

Introduction

As a student conducting research, you will come across many different types of sources including images, personal documents, books, articles, and newspapers. Historians classify these sources into primary and secondary sources. Deciding whether a source is a primary or secondary one can be confusing, as often it depends on how the source is being used. In this tutorial, you will learn about the differences between primary and secondary sources and about how they are used in research. You will also practice identifying primary and secondary sources.

Readings:

Primary Sources
Primary sources are original records created at the time historical events occurred, or well after events, in the form of memoirs and oral histories. Primary sources may include letters, manuscripts, diaries, journals, newspapers, speeches, interviews, memoirs, documents produced by government agencies such as Congress or the Office of the President, photographs, audio recordings, moving pictures or video recordings, research data, and objects or artifacts such as works of art or ancient roads, buildings, tools, and weapons. These sources serve as the raw material to interpret the past, and when they are used along with previous interpretations by historians, they provide the resources necessary for historical research.

Secondary Sources
A secondary source is something written about primary sources. Secondary sources include comments on and interpretations of the original material produced by qualified scholars who provide references for the sources of their evaluation, such as notes or bibliography, which allow others to locate and evaluate those same sources for themselves. Secondary sources include scholarly books and articles found in scholarly journals that publish peer-reviewed original research. They may also include evaluations or critiques of someone else's original research, or textbooks written to instruct students.

Here are some examples of Primary Sources and Secondary Sources

Primary Sources
- Lincoln's Gettysburg Address
- The poem “Field Work” by Seamus Heaney
- The lyrics of 2 Live Crew's album As Nasty As They Wanna Be
- The text of Barack Obama's keynote address to the 2004 Democratic National Convention, found in The New York Times.

Secondary Sources
- Garry Wills' book - Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words That Remade America
- The article "Discouraging "Objectionable" Music Content: Litigation, Legislation, Economic Pressure, and More Speech" found in Communications & the Law, April 2003 discussing 2 Live Crew's lyrics.

Is it Primary or Secondary?

The answer to that question is, “Well, it depends.” The distinction between types of sources can get tricky because a secondary source may also be a primary source. Garry Wills’ book about Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address, for example, can be looked at as both a secondary and a primary source. The distinction may depend on how you are using the source and the nature of your research. If you are researching Abraham Lincoln, the book would be a secondary source because Wills is offering his opinions about Lincoln and the Gettysburg Address. If your assignment is to write a book review of Lincoln at Gettysburg, the book becomes a primary source, because you are commenting, evaluating, and discussing Garry Wills’ ideas.

You cannot always determine if something is primary or secondary just because of source it is found in. Articles in newspapers and magazines are usually considered secondary sources. However, if a story in a newspaper about the Iraq war is an eyewitness account, that would be a primary source. If the reporter, however, includes additional materials he or she has gathered through interviews or other investigations, the article would be a secondary source. An interview in the Rolling Stone with Chris Robinson of the Black Crowes would be a primary source, but a review of the latest Black Crowes album would be a secondary source. In contrast, scholarly journals include research articles with primary materials, but they also have review articles that are not primary sources.

Some experts include tertiary sources in addition to primary and secondary. These are sources that provide a short overview or brief summary of a topic, often digesting other sources or repackaging ideas related to a specific topic. Chief examples are Wikipedia entries, articles in encyclopedias, and chapters in textbooks. This is the reason that you may be advised not to include an encyclopedia article in a final bibliography.

Practice

Two history students, Rainbow and Stuart, need your help using primary and secondary sources. Hover over each picture to read about how you can help them and then choose one to help.

Student A: Rainbow

Rainbow is preparing to do a paper on the peace movement of the 60s. She knows little about it beyond her own parents’ stories. Each parent seem to have quite different views and memories. Although her parents’ stories are fun to hear, she knows that she must seek out scholarly research and debate to learn how the scholars view the events from a scholarly distance and perspective. She assumes their work will be a bit less emotional than her parents.

She has not yet determined her exact theme so she is exploring several general areas in order to determine a more specific focus.

Rainbow needs the help of her peers to navigate through this project. She hopes that you will help her think through the steps that she must take.

Her assignment calls for the use of both popular and scholarly resources. She must also use both primary and secondary sources.
Read Instructions: After some reading, Rainbow decides to focus on the art work of the 60s peace movement. She finds the poster shown here, and needs to determine if it is a primary or secondary source. You can help her by examining the source more closely. Hover over the image to see more information about it. Then, decide if it is a primary or secondary source.

Source one: A poster of “What if they gave a war and nobody came…” Rainbow found this poster on the web. She finds out that it was part of an exhibition titled “The Sixties Project Presents: A Decade of Protest, Political Posters from the United States, Cuba and Vietnam 1965-1975” held in 1996. She believes that these posters can give her a view of the political art and expression that took place during that time.

A picture of this poster

Which type of a source is this?
Primary
This poster is an original source from the time period Rainbow is researching. Rainbow is using this poster as a primary source. Move on to the next resource.


A picture of this book
Rainbow wonders if there are additional sources for original posters. Checking the library catalog, she finds the book shown here. Looking at the book, she discovers a chapter discussing how artists in 1960s New York influenced the peace movement. In this chapter, the author examines the use of political posters in the city and argues that these posters helped to mobilize protesters. Rainbow decides to use the poster in her paper.

**Which type of a source is this?**

*Secondary.*

It is a secondary source. Rainbow is using an essay in this book. The author is interpreting the posters in the book, that is, the primary sources. Move on to the next source.

**Source Three:** An article in the magazine, PTA. In searching a library database, Rainbow finds an article titled “Waging Peace in the Sixties” from the 1964 issue of the magazine, PTA. She reads the article and finds that it offers parents advice on how to get their children involved in the peace movement. Rainbow decides that she will use article in order to demonstrate how prevalent the peace movement of the 1960s was.

A picture of this magazine

**Which type of a source is this?**
Primary
This is an article from the 1960s, and Rainbow is using it to give an example of how one educator encouraged parents to make posters and other peace paraphernalia with their children. Rainbow is using this magazine article as a primary source.

Student B: Stuart
Stuart is looking for biographical material on Stewart L. Udall. Stuart became interested in this Arizona native, conservationist and Congressman when he read several tribute articles following Udall’s death in 2010. Stuart is himself an enthusiastic environmentalist and would like to learn more about Udall's life and work. And to tell you the truth, Stuart also likes Stewart's name even though he believes it is not spelled correctly.

Stuart would like to focus on an aspect of Udall’s conservation work in the West, but he does not yet have enough information to form a clear focus.

Stuart did not spend sufficient time looking over materials that would help him distinguish between primary and secondary material. He will need your help as he begins his research. Go on to the next page to get started helping Stuart.

Read Instructions: Stuart uses the UA Library Catalog and the Special Collections Website to do some more research. He finds the following three items about Udall’s involvement in several environmental efforts. Examine each resource by hovering over the image. Then, determine if the use is a primary or secondary use.

Source one: A book titled “The Quiet Crisis”. While searching the Library Catalog, Stuart finds this book written by Mr. Udall in 1964. Udall writes about the need for immediate action in order to help the environment. Stuart finds one chapter that is particularly passionate where Udall writes about his love of the southwest. Stuart decides to use this chapter in his paper in order to give examples of the Udall’s early writings on the topic of water conservation and planning.

A picture of this book

Which type of a source is this?
Primary
Stuart is treating this book written by Udall in the 1960s as an original source document that he is using to familiarize himself better with Udall and his life. Stuart would use this book as a primary source.
Source Two: A book titled “The Nation's Largest Landlord”. Stuart also finds this book in the Library Catalog. The book is titled “The Nation's Largest Landlord: The Bureau of Land Management in the American West” and is written by James R. Skillen in 2009. The author discusses the early work of Udall and how he helped shape US policies on water conservation and several water projects. Stuart likes the author’s analysis and examination of Udall, so he decides to use several passages from the book in this paper.

Which type of a source is this?
Secondary
This book gives an analysis of Stewart Udall and his life many years after the events took place. Stuart would use this book as a secondary source because it offers one scholar’s analysis of the BLM and Udall’s experiences.

Source Three: A letter written to Mr. Udall. While searching the digitized Stewart Udall Papers on the Special Collections website, Stuart discovers this letter dated December 5, 1963 written to Mr. Udall from the US Assistant Surgeon General G.E. McCallum. In the letter, he praises Udall for his analysis of and insight into the Pacific Southwest Water plan. Stuart decides to use the letter in his research paper in order to show how respected and involved Mr. Udall was with several water projects in the southwest.

A picture of this letter
Which type of a source is this?
Primary
This letter is an unpublished, original source document, and Stuart is using this letter as a primary source.

Thanks to your help, both Rainbow and Stuart received As on their final papers. Their history professor said they both had some great resources.

Good work and thanks for all your help.

The website below from the American Library Association is a great place to start learning about primary resources on the web.

Using Primary Sources on the Web

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