

Primary Sources

Defining a Primary Resource

It is the study of a subject through firsthand observation and investigation, such as analyzing a literary or historical text, a film, or a performance; conducting a survey or an interview; or carrying out a laboratory experiment and includes statistical data, historical documents and works of literature and art.

-Based on the MLA Handbook, 6th edition.

Types of Primary Resources

Diaries, Journals, Speeches, Interviews, Letters, Memos, Manuscripts and Other Papers

Where individuals describe events during their lifetime in which they were observers or participants.

Memoirs and Autobiographies

These are less reliable since they are written long after events occurred and may be distorted by bias, dimming memory or the revised perspective that comes with hindsight.

Photographs, Audio Recordings, Video Recordings or Motion Pictures

These types of media capture the events as they happen. However, the onset of new technologies in these areas may make it more difficult to rely on such media for accurate information.

Published Written Materials

Books, periodical and newspaper articles are written at the time about a particular event. In most cases, journalists or other observers write these accounts. The important aspect is to distinguish between material written at the time an event occurred and material written after the event happened such as, an historical analysis.

Records of Organizations and Agencies of Government

Minutes, reports, correspondence, etc. of an organization or agency serve as an ongoing record of the activity and practices of that organization or agency.

Government records can be consulted to document events such as, births, deaths, and marriages, etc.

Statistical Reports in the Sciences and Social Sciences

For modern history, the best evidence of broad changes is contained in social science surveys or research studies. This research is generally reported in book form, government reports or most commonly in articles published in scholarly journals.

Where to Start

Encyclopedias, Chronologies, Biographies

These resources will contain factual information such as, dates, names of individuals, and information about cultural, social or intellectual movements.

Subject Bibliographies

Bibliographies contain citations for a particular subject or field of study and often single out primary sources from other research materials.

Works Cited

Scan the works cited pages and note what primary sources they use.

Searching for Primary Resources by Keyword

Attach the following terminology when searching for a primary resource: *Correspondence, Diaries, Interviews, Personal Narratives, and Pamphlets.*

Attitudes or the Mentality of a Time

A public opinion poll from the time period is a good research tool to gauge the general public's thoughts on a particular subject or event. Ideas and opinion are conveyed through mass media (i.e., TV programming), film, literature, music and art. Sources written or produced at the time of an event provide insight of how people were thinking and responding to a variety of issues.