

Locating Primary and Secondary Sources

Subject Research Guide

Contained within this document are selected resources at the Monmouth University Library, useful for locating primary and secondary sources. For additional resources, search the Library catalog or call the reference desk at 732.571.3438.

Historical research requires careful consideration of several sources in order to ensure a successful essay or research paper. There are three main categories of sources consulted in historical research: Primary, Secondary, and Finding. This guide will introduce you to each, and explain their differences.

Primary Sources

A primary source is a document or other *historical evidence* written or created during or near the period under study. Because of their close relation to the subject, primary sources usually offer special insight about their topic. The person, organization, or body under study often generates them. There are many examples of primary sources; each varies according to the nature of your topic. Primary sources generally are:

- **Original Documents:** Diaries, manuscripts, speeches, letters, minutes, interviews, news or film footage, autobiographies, and official records and documents
Note: Translations and excerpts are acceptable.
- **Creative Works:** Poetry, drama, novels, short stories, music, and art
- **Relics or Artifacts:** Jewelry, pottery, furniture, clothing, and buildings

Some examples of primary sources and subjects for which they might be used are:

- *The Diary of Anne Frank: Experiences of Jews in World War II* (book)
- *The Persistence of Memory* by Salvatore Dali (artwork)
- *The Declaration of Independence: American Independence from Britain* (reference book)
- *The Bible: Hebrew Customs During Biblical Times* (religious text)
- *Richard III* by William Shakespeare (play)
- *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Bronte (novel)
- Justice Taney's opinion in *Dred Scott v. Sanford: Historic Supreme Court Decisions* (briefing)
- *U. S. Census Records: Trends in Population* (statistics book)
- "The Killers" by Ernest Hemmingway (short story)

Secondary Sources

Secondary sources interpret and analyze primary sources. Secondary sources are usually the result of a writer's interpretation and synthesis of primary sources. Secondary sources include—but are not limited to—*textbooks, journal articles, histories, criticisms, commentaries, and encyclopedias*.

Some examples of secondary sources include:

- A journal article that interprets a scholar's contribution in a field
- A literary criticism
- A chapter in a book discussing the Dred Scott decision

An example from a literary journal:

Stanza, George. "Richard III: An Examination of Machiavellian Discourse and Social Obedience." Shakespeare Studies 1.3 (Sept.-Oct. 2005): 60-75.

An example from an article published inside a book:

Kermode, Frank. "Richard III's Ruthless Will: An Examination of Megalomania." Shakespeare: The Invention of the Human. By Harold Bloom. Ed. Steve Smith. London: Harcourt, 2003. 40-70. Rpt. in Shakespeare Criticism.

Determining Priority: Primary and Secondary Sources

Primary sources are typically given preference over secondary sources. Secondary sources are useful to help increase your understanding of a subject and support your point, but do not replace the primary source.

It is also important to understand that primary and secondary sources are sometimes indistinguishable. The subject of your study often determines their category. For example: If you are researching George Washington, the Revolutionary War general, primary sources would include his personal writings and correspondences. Secondary sources would include biographies about him as well as books and articles about the War. ...but...

If you are researching interpretations of the leadership of George Washington, and how interpretations may have changed over the years, then the biographies about him become your primary sources. In this case, the scholarly work and analyses are being studied, and not the life of the man.

Finding Sources

Finding sources are access tools that lead you to primary or secondary sources. They include:

Bibliographies - Check to see if a bibliography, or list of sources, has been compiled on your topic.

Catalogs - Library catalogs can help you locate primary and secondary sources.

Periodical Indexes - Print guides to journals & magazines, such as the *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature* and *Poole's Index to Periodical Literature*; and to newspapers, such as *The New York Times Index*, can lead you to relevant primary or secondary sources.

Electronic Resources - Online indexes to some primary and many secondary sources are available. The online index, or database, is the finding source, and the retrieved articles are the primary or secondary sources.

Need more help?

- Access the Monmouth University Library Page at <http://library.monmouth.edu/>
- Access the Research Help Page at <http://library.monmouth.edu/help/help.php>
- Use our Ask-a-Librarian service at <http://library.monmouth.edu/help/ask.php>
- See the Library's hours at <http://library.monmouth.edu/about/about.php#hours>
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