

Primary and Secondary Sources

Historical sources can be divided into two main categories: *Primary and Secondary*. Both are vital to History Day students as they interpret their topics within the appropriate historical context. Thorough examination of available primary and secondary sources allows students to construct their own analysis related to the impact and significance of their topics in history.

Primary sources contain “firsthand” knowledge of events and people and are essential to a good research project. Think of a primary source as an eyewitness account created by a participant in (or contemporary of) an event in history. Letters, diaries, speeches, interviews, periodical literature and newspapers from the time are all examples of primary sources. In addition, books written by the person whom one is studying or books written by people who took part in the event that one is studying may also be primary sources. Primary sources allow students the opportunity to analyze and interpret what they read, see, or hear.

In contrast, a **secondary** source is something that was not created first-hand by someone who participated in the historical era. Secondary sources are usually created by historians based on the historian's interpretation of primary sources. Since they are usually created long after the event occurred, secondary sources are influenced by the passing of time, offering a different vantage point than someone who participated in the event or directly influenced the issue. Secondary sources help students place their topics—and their primary source research—in historical context. Similar to primary sources, secondary sources vary in form and may include articles, books, and interviews with experts, for example. Secondary sources remove the student from the interpretation of history while presenting the author's personal analysis and opinions. Using a variety of secondary sources provides students with multiple perspectives, exposing them to a variety of opinions and interpretations.

Source Classification

Sometimes it is difficult to determine whether a source is primary or secondary—even historians sometimes disagree and there is not always one right answer. Students should use bibliographic annotations to explain why a particular source is categorized as primary or secondary if it is likely to be controversial.

What happens when a source includes both primary and secondary information? In addition to an author's interpretation of history, secondary sources may contain primary information such as photographs, speech transcripts, or images of documents. Students may choose to use secondary sources as “road maps” to museums, libraries, or archives to locate the same primary sources that the author used. Or, they may opt to classify a book that contains important original photographs and documents as primary rather than secondary if they used the source to gain access to the primary sources rather than focusing on the author's interpretive content. In this case, students should explain their source classification in their annotation.

For additional discussion of primary and secondary sources and source classification, please visit: <http://www.nhd.org/ConductingResearch.htm>