How to Research Primary Sources

What Are Primary Sources?

Historians use a wide variety of sources to answer questions about the past. In their research, history scholars use both primary sources and secondary sources. Primary sources are actual records that have survived from the past, such as letters, photographs, or articles of clothing. Secondary sources are accounts of the past created by people writing about events sometime after they happened.

For example, your history textbook is a secondary source. Someone wrote most of your textbook long after historical events took place. Your textbook may also include some primary sources, such as direct quotes from people living in the past or excerpts from historical documents.

People living in the past left many clues about their lives. These clues include both primary and secondary sources in the form of books, personal papers, government documents, letters, oral accounts, diaries, maps, photographs, reports, novels and short stories, artifacts, coins, stamps, and many other things. Historians call all of these clues together the historical record.

The Historical Record

The historical record is huge. It contains literally billions of pieces of evidence about the past. Despite its huge size, the historical record gives us just a tiny glimpse of the past. Most of what happened in the past was never documented. Many sources of information about the past have been lost or destroyed. Some primary sources were accumulated simply by accident.

However, some historical sources were created and saved by people interested in recording history. People kept journals, wrote diaries and autobiographies, recorded family trees, and saved business and personal letters and papers. How can the historical record be both huge and limited? What kind of historical records do you leave behind in your daily life?

Analysis of Primary Sources

Historians analyze historical sources in different ways. First, historians think about where, when, and why a document was created. They consider whether a source was created close in location and time to an actual historical event. Historians also think about the purpose of a source. Was it a personal diary intended to be kept private? Was the document prepared for the public?

Some primary sources may be judged more reliable than others, but every source is biased in some way. As a result, historians read sources skeptically and critically. They also cross-check sources against other evidence and sources. Historians follow a few basic rules to help them analyze primary sources. Read these rules below. Then read the questions for analyzing primary sources. Use these rules and questions as you analyze primary source documents yourself.

Time and Place Rule
To judge the quality of a primary source, historians use the **time and place rule**. This rule says the closer in time and place a source and its creator were to an event in the past, the better the source will be. Based on the time and place rule, better primary sources (starting with the most reliable) might include:

- Direct traces of the event;
- Accounts of the event, created at the time it occurred, by firsthand observers and participants;
- Accounts of the event, created after the event occurred, by firsthand observers and participants;
- Accounts of the event, created after the event occurred, by people who did not participate or witness the event, but who used interviews or evidence from the time of the event.

**Bias Rule**

The historians' second rule is the **bias rule**. It says that every source is biased in some way. Documents tell us only what the creator of the document thought happened, or perhaps only what the creator wants us to think happened. As a result, historians follow these bias rule guidelines when they review evidence from the past:

- Every piece of evidence and every source must be read or viewed skeptically and critically.
- No piece of evidence should be taken at face value. The creator's point of view must be considered.
- Each piece of evidence and source must be cross–checked and compared with related sources and pieces of evidence.

**Questions for Analyzing Primary Sources**

The following questions may help you judge the quality of primary sources:

1. Who created the source and why? Was it created through a spur–of–the–moment act, a routine transaction, or a thoughtful, deliberate process?
2. Did the recorder have firsthand knowledge of the event? Or did the recorder report what others saw and heard?
3. Was the recorder a neutral party, or did the creator have opinions or interests that might have influenced what was recorded?
4. Did the recorder produce the source for personal use, for one or more individuals, or for a large audience?
5. Was the source meant to be public or private?
6. Did the recorder wish to inform or persuade others? (Check the words in the source. The words may tell you whether the recorder was trying to be objective or persuasive.) Did the recorder have reasons to be honest or dishonest?
7. Was the information recorded during the event, immediately after the event, or after some lapse of time? How large a lapse of time?
Types of Primary Sources

When analyzing primary sources, historians consider the type of primary source under study. Different primary sources were created for different reasons. Knowing the different types of primary sources will help you evaluate the reliability of primary sources. Read about the different types of primary sources below.

Published Documents

Some primary sources are published documents. They were created for large audiences and were distributed widely. Published documents include books, magazines, newspapers, government documents, non–government reports, literature of all kinds, advertisements, maps, pamphlets, posters, laws, and court decisions.

When reviewing published documents, remember that just because something was published does not make it truthful, accurate, or reliable. Every document has a creator, and every creator has a point of view, blind spots, and biases. Also remember that even biased and opinionated sources can tell us important things about the past.

Unpublished Documents

Many types of unpublished documents have been saved, and can be used as primary sources. These include personal letters, diaries, journals, wills, deeds, family Bibles containing family histories, school report cards, and many other sources. Unpublished business records such as correspondence, financial ledgers, information about customers, board meeting minutes, and research and development files also give clues about the past.

Unpublished documents often come from community organizations, churches, service clubs, political parties, and labor unions in the form of membership lists, meeting minutes, speeches, financial and other records. Government at all levels creates a variety of unpublished records. These include police and court records, census records, tax and voter lists, departmental reports, and classified documents.

Unlike published documents, unpublished records may be difficult to find because few copies exist. For example, personal letters may be found only in the possession of the person to whom the letters were sent. Letters of famous or remarkable people may be collected and eventually published. Keep in mind that letter writers did not intend (and perhaps could not imagine) that their letters would be read by more than one person. Because unpublished documents were seldom meant to be read by the public, they provide interesting clues about the past.

Oral Traditions/Oral Histories

Oral traditions and oral histories provide another way to learn about the past from people with firsthand knowledge of historical events. Recently, spoken words that make up oral histories have gained importance as primary sources. Historians and others find out about the lives of ordinary people through spoken stories and tales. Oral histories provide important historical
evidence about people, especially minority groups, who were excluded from mainstream publications or did not leave behind written primary sources.

Oral histories are as old as human beings. Before the invention of writing, information passed from generation to generation through the spoken word. Many people around the world continue to use oral traditions to pass along knowledge and wisdom. Interviews and recordings of community elders and witnesses to historical events provide exciting stories, anecdotes, and other information about the past.

The above material is excerpted from the Library of Congress's American Memory website (http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/index.html).