



Primary Materials Online

Sources for Sources

Definitions

More than one student has defined primary sources as “the books and Web sites that I used the most.” If this description misses the true distinction between primary and secondary sources, it also suggests that students may not appreciate the vast and vibrant array of materials that convey details about people, events, and trends of the past.

Definitions vary for the terms “primary” and “secondary” source, as do the categories into which different types of resources are grouped. Here are broad definitions that allow a wide variety of original material to be included:

Primary source: *documents, records, and other evidence that are original to the time period, culture, or event under study and that are not derived from another source.*

Secondary source: *documents, records, and other evidence that are derived from original sources and that interpret or analyze a time period, culture, or event.*

Teachers or students also may consult tertiary sources, which are encyclopedias, indexes, textbooks, or similar references that give summaries of the current state of knowledge or research about a topic or that list primary and secondary sources for additional information.

Among the materials that constitute primary sources are: written documents and records (institutional, commercial, scholarly, and personal), objects, artifacts, buildings, structures, maps, artworks, photographs, film and audio recordings, narratives, legends, music, dance, folkways, family and community history, and landscapes.

Rationale

Teachers often require students to use primary sources when preparing a research paper or project, but such materials easily can be incorporated into all aspects of instruction. Given that textbooks deliver information that is based on someone else’s interpretation and problem solving, primary sources offer students unique opportunities to explore the past in challenging, interactive, and authentic ways. The Library of Congress gives two reasons for infusing original materials into the curriculum (<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/lessons/fw.html>):

“Primary sources expose students to multiple perspectives on great issues of the past and present. History, after all, deals with matters that were debated furiously by the participants. Interpretations of the past also are debated among historians, policy makers, politicians, and ordinary citizens. By working with primary sources, students become involved in these debates.

“Primary sources help students to develop knowledge, skills, and analytical abilities. By dealing directly with primary sources, students engage in asking questions, thinking critically, making intelligent inferences, and developing reasoned explanations and interpretations of events and issues of the past and present.”

Defining Primary Sources

These sites define and describe primary and secondary sources.

Primary Sources Research—Yale University Library

<http://www.library.yale.edu/ref/err/primsrsrcs.htm>

These Web pages provide informative descriptions of certain types of primary sources, including books and monographs, serials, government documents, manuscripts, archives, maps, dissertations, visual materials, music, artifacts, and machine-readable data files.

Research Using Primary Sources—University of California, Bancroft Library

<http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/TeachingLib/Guides/PrimarySources.html>

Although written for college students, this guide to identifying and locating sources offers useful information for younger students as well.

Using Primary Sources in the Primary Grades—ERIC Digests

<http://www.ericdigests.org/1999-1/primary.html>

This article examines the various definitions of primary sources and discusses why and how they should be used in elementary classrooms.

Using Primary Sources on the Web

<http://www.lib.washington.edu/subject/History/RUSA>

Step-by-step suggestions provide a simple and useful outline for finding and using primary and secondary sources.

Finding Primary Sources

These sites provide lists of collections of primary sources.

American Journeys—Wisconsin Historical Society and National History Day

<http://www.americanjourneys.org>

American Memory—Library of Congress

<http://memory.loc.gov>

Archival Research Catalog—National Archives and Records Administration

http://www.archives.gov/research_room/arc/index.html

Archives Center—National Museum of American History

<http://americanhistory.si.edu/archives/homec.htm>

Archives of American Art—Smithsonian Institution

<http://archivesofamericanart.si.edu>

Archives of American Gardens—Smithsonian Institution

http://gardens.si.edu/horticulture/res_ed/AAG/home.htm

Digital Librarian—University of Michigan

<http://www.digital-librarian.com/electronic.html>

Florida Folklife from WPA Collections, 1937–1942—Library of Congress

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/flwpahtml/flwpa.html>

Florida Electronic Library—State Library of Florida

<http://www.flelibrary.org>

Florida Memory Project—Florida State Archives

<http://www.floridamemory.com>

Freer/Sackler Gallery of Art Archives—Smithsonian Institution

<http://www.asia.si.edu>

Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History

<http://www.gilderlehrman.org>

Index of Native American History Sources on the Internet—Karen Strom

www.hanksville.org/NAresources/indices/NAhistory.html

National Air and Space Museum Archives—Smithsonian Institution

<http://www.nasm.si.edu/nasm/arch/archdiv.htm>

National Anthropological Archives—Smithsonian Institution

<http://www.nmnh.si.edu/naa>

National Archives and Records Administration

<http://www.archives.gov>

National Museum of African Art Archives—Smithsonian Institution

<http://africa.si.edu/research/archives.html>

National Museum of the American Indian—Smithsonian Institution

<http://www.nmai.si.edu>

National Register Research—National Register of Historic Places

<http://www.cr.nps.gov/nr/research>

National Security Archive—George Washington University

<http://www.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv>

Our Documents—NHD and NARA

<http://www.ourdocuments.gov>

Research Links—National History Day

<http://www.nhd.org/ResearchSources.htm>

Resources in Black Studies—University of California, Santa Barbara Libraries

<http://www.library.ucsb.edu/subjects/blackstudies/black.html>

Smithsonian Institution Archives

<http://www.si.edu/archives>

Social Studies Sources—Indiana University, Bloomington

<http://www.indiana.edu/~socialst>

Using Primary Sources—ProTeacher

<http://www.proteacher.com/090093.shtml>

Women's History Resources—University of Wisconsin Libraries

<http://www.library.wisc.edu/libraries/WomensStudies/hist.htm>

Lesson Plans and Activity Ideas

Numerous Web sites present lesson plans and classroom ideas that use primary sources as a central element of the activity.

American Memory Learning Page—Library of Congress

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/amhome.html>

The home page of the American Memory Project provides links to historical collections on the Web, resources for teachers, and lesson plans.

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/lessons/psources/pshome.html>

An excellent lesson plan introduces students to primary sources and presents activities that teach techniques for analyzing such materials.

<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/ndlpedu/lessons/primary.html>

Activities are suggested for six broad categories of primary sources: objects, images, audio, statistics, text, and the community. Suggestions range from using historic photographs to study fashion trends over time to researching the history of famous local buildings and sites.

EDSITEment—National Endowment for the Humanities

<http://edsitement.neh.gov>

Drawing on humanities resources from some of the world's great museums, libraries, cultural institutions, and universities, EDSITEment offers lesson plans relating to art and culture, literature and language arts, foreign language, and history and social studies.

Florida Memory Project—Florida State Archives

<http://www.FloridaMemory.com>

With more than 200,000 photographs online, the Florida Photographic Collection offers the most complete portrait of Florida available. The “Collections” and “Highlights of Florida History” include more than 100,000 images of historically significant. The “Online Classroom” has units based on primary sources, with lesson plans correlated to the Sunshine State Standards.

School Programs for Students and Teachers—Maryland Historical Society

<http://www.mdhs.org/teachers/worksheets.html>

A set of nine worksheets teach students how to distinguish between primary and secondary sources, interpret different types of sources (broadsides/ads, documents, maps, pictures, objects, and oral histories), and turn an idea into a research project.

Smithsonian Education—Smithsonian Institution

<http://www.smithsonianeducation.org/educators>

Primary source-based lesson plans on a variety of topics, as well as information about publications, field trips, and professional development opportunities, are presented on the Web site of the nation’s premier museum complex.

Teacher Resources—Ohio Historical Society

<http://www.ohiohistory.org/resource/teachers/primary.html>

Materials downloaded from the Internet are the basis for a lesson that outlines a simple strategy for introducing the analysis and evaluation of primary source documents.

The Digital Classroom—National Archives and Records Administration

<http://www.archives.gov/education>

More than sixty lesson plans and activity ideas explore topics in American history, organized by eras. Reproducible copies of primary documents from the National Archives holdings and analysis worksheets for seven primary source types are provided.

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