

Primary Source Documents - FAQ's

What is a primary source document?

A primary source is a first-hand account of a person, place, event, etc. The author of a primary source may be writing about him/herself or about a person, place, or event he/she witnessed.

What are some examples of primary sources?

A primary source can be a variety of works; for example, diary entries, letters, autobiographies, constitutions, emails, text messages, fine arts, artifacts, memos, bulletins, advertisements, photographs, drawings, interviews, obituaries, tape recordings, and any other source that provides the reader/observer with first-hand knowledge.

Why do we read/examine/care about primary sources?

Primary sources allow the reader/examiner an opportunity to study an individual through his/her writings, works of art, conversations with others, and/or any of the above listed sources. Through these sources the reader is able to analyze, theorize, and/or form opinions about the individuals being studied. Primary sources help to validate writings by students, teachers, historians, and scholars.

What is a secondary source?

A secondary source can be classified as second-hand knowledge of a person, place, or event. Biographies, textbooks, scholarly articles, essays about other people/places/events in which the author was not present are considered secondary sources. Most well-written essays, research papers, and books contain evidence from a variety of primary sources, and take into consideration secondary source analysis as well.

Can you distinguish between a primary and secondary source?

Read the following statements - If the statement describes a primary source, write "p", if it describes a secondary source, write "s" in the space provided.

_____ A diary entry written by Anne Frank.

_____ A letter from Timothy to his mother about an event he witnessed.

_____ A history textbook.

_____ A tape recording.

_____ Vincent van Gogh's *Starry Night* painting.

_____ An essay about Martin Luther King, Jr. by a historian/scholar.

- _____ A film about Pearl Harbor.
- _____ A text message from Jose to Diana.
- _____ An autobiography.
- _____ A newspaper article about an event that the journalist witnessed.
- _____ An interview.
- _____ The Declaration of Independence.
- _____ A Thomas Jefferson biography.
- _____ Aztec pottery in the Museum of Anthropology in Mexico City.
- _____ A conversation with an individual who spoke with someone who witnessed the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City.
- _____ A photograph of a vehicle collision.
- _____ An email.
- _____ A memo from the principal to his/her teachers/staff.
- _____ The 7:00 p.m. nightly news broadcast.
- _____ A children's book about Harriet Tubman and the Underground Railroad.
- _____ An encyclopedia article about Abraham Lincoln.
- _____ A window advertisement for the sale of Ford Model T's in the 1920s.
- _____ An obituary.

How do I read/examine a primary source?

1. Pretend you are a detective! Think about the author and the intended purpose of the source.
2. If you are analyzing a written work, read through the entire source first.
3. Use your pen & highlighter! Re-read the source and underline interesting passages and make annotations in the margins. Never leave the page clean!
4. Pick 1-2 quotes that you think are the most important.
5. Write a summary. Take a few minutes after reading a document to write down your thoughts/feelings and understanding of what the author was trying to accomplish.