

HANDOUT: PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SOURCES

When historians study a topic, they try to gather a wide variety of sources during their research. Historians use sources like a lawyer uses evidence. Both need information to "make their case." But not all sources are the same. Historians classify their sources in two categories: Primary and Secondary. You are going to need to use both types of sources for a successful History Day project.

Secondary Sources

Secondary sources are usually published books or articles by an author who makes a personal interpretation about a topic based on primary sources. The writer is not an eyewitness to, or a participant in, the historic event. Most books, encyclopedias, and websites are secondary sources. Secondary sources are useful because they provide important background information about your topic. The footnotes and bibliographies of secondary sources will also lead you to primary sources.

Examples of Secondary Sources:

- Biographies
- History textbooks
- Books about the topic
- Articles about the topic
- Encyclopedias
- Media documentaries
- Interviews with scholars/experts
- Websites

Primary Sources

Primary sources are materials directly related to a topic by time or participation. They provide a first-hand account about a person or an event because they were written or produced in the time period you are studying, are eyewitness accounts of historic events, are documents published at the time of specific historic events, or are later recollections by participants in historic events.

Examples of Primary Sources:

- Historic objects
- Government records
- Photographs
- Manuscript collections
- Newspapers from the era
- Music of the era
- Interviews with participants
- Letters
- Original film footage
- Autobiographies

Could It Be Both Primary and Secondary?

It all depends on how you use it. For your History Day bibliography, you are going to have to think of how you used the source and then categorize it as **either primary or secondary**. Each source should only appear in your bibliography once.

If it could be confusing to your judge, use your annotation to explain why you categorized a source as either primary or secondary. For example, websites are usually secondary source, however, let's say you found a website written by the participant in an event where they discuss their experiences. This source should be categorized as primary – since the author was directly involved in the event – and you should use your annotation to explain this.