

## Guide to Primary Sources

### What is a primary source?

A primary source is any item that tells us about an event, era, or topic that was created by someone who witnessed or experienced it during their lifetime. In other words, it is someone's first-hand account.

Some examples of primary sources include letters, diaries, memoirs, photographs, artifacts, scientific observations and studies, court documents, transcripts of speeches, newspaper articles reporting about the events of their day, oral histories, and artwork.

Primary sources are being created every day. In fact, each time you write about, email, text, photograph, paint, or record something you have personally experienced you are making a primary source for the future.

**NOTE:** A source about a specific era, created by someone who did not live in that era, is called a secondary source. This would include most textbooks and journal articles.

### How do I understand my primary sources?

Primary sources are an excellent way to see into a specific era or event without being there yourself. To fully understand what your source is telling you, you must think of the world in which it was created, the person who created it, and why they might have done so. Considering the circumstances around the source's creation will help you learn about the period in which it was created and why it is important.

Below are some questions to ask as you engage with a primary source:

- Who created this source?
- When did they create it?
- What was the purpose of creation?
- Who was the intended audience?
- What is the historical context for this source?
- What are the creator's possible influences and biases?

**NOTE:** Like all sources used in research, primary sources must be cited. Do not forget to consult the style guide preferred by your professor (Chicago, MLA, APA) for specific formatting.

## Test Yourself: Primary Sources

Below you will find ten examples of possible sources. Some are primary sources and some are not. Read each example and ask yourself, is this a primary source? Then, go to the following page to find the answers and their explanations.

1. A collection of essays analyzing the letters of Jane Austen, published in 1999.
2. A video of a family chronicling their trip to South Africa in 2015, shared on YouTube.
3. The text of an 1814 speech given by Napoleon Bonaparte to his soldiers.
4. An 1825 diary entry detailing what the writer saw at the inauguration of President John Quincy Adams.
5. A series of text messages from 2024 between sisters discussing the protest march they recently attended in Ireland.
6. A photograph of participants at a festival in India in 1975.
7. A 2023 New York Times article about Haiti achieving independence in 1804.
8. The transcript of the 1800 murder trial of Levi Weeks.
9. The notes taken by a scientist regarding his observations of the behavior of rabbits in 1632.
10. A collection of recipes used for the English king in 1390, written by his chefs.

## Test Yourself: Primary Sources - Answers

1. NO. A collection of essays written in the late 1900s about someone who lived in the 1800s cannot be a primary source because none of the writers lived in that era or spoke with Jane Austen. This would be considered a secondary source because the authors are removed from the experiences in Austen's letters.
2. YES. The family is sharing their personal experiences of an event, so it is a primary source.
3. YES. Texts of speeches are primary sources because they record a moment in time and tell the reader exactly what was said and heard in that specific moment.
4. YES. Any form of personal diary that talks about something the writer experienced or attended is considered a primary source.
5. YES. The sisters attended the protest march and are sharing their experiences, so it is a primary source.
6. YES. A photograph shows the viewer a moment in time and is captured by someone who was there, making it a primary source.
7. NO. Although this article is about a historical event, the author is writing about it from both a different country (the United States, not Haiti) and time period (the 2020s, not the 1800s), which means it is not a primary source. The author did not experience the Haitian independence movement, therefore this would be a secondary source.
8. YES. A transcript of a court trial is a document that tells the reader what occurred as it was occurring, so it is a primary source.
9. YES. The notes, observations, and experiment results are a primary source because they are written by the scientist(s) who conducted the research.
10. YES. The chefs who used the recipes wrote them down, so the reader knows what they were using when they were using it, making this a primary source.