

What is a Primary Source?

(in Historical Research)

There are three types of sources used in **historical** research.

I. PRIMARY SOURCES

A primary source is a document or other sort of evidence written or created during the time under study. Primary sources offer an inside view of a particular event. Some types are:

- **Original Documents** (excerpts or translations acceptable): Diaries, speeches, letters, minutes, interviews, news film footage, autobiographies, official records
- **Creative Works:** Poetry, drama, novels, music, art
- **Relics or Artifacts:** jewelry, pottery, furniture, clothing, buildings

Examples of primary sources:

- *Diary of Anne Frank* – experiences of Jews in World War II
- *The Declaration of Independence* – U.S. history
- *Bible* - Hebrew customs in Bible times
- Arrowheads and pottery – American Indian history
- Plato's *Republic* – women in ancient Greece

II. SECONDARY SOURCES

A secondary source interprets and analyzes primary sources. Secondary sources are one step removed from the event. Examples: a book about the effects of World War I, a journal article which interprets a scholar's contribution in a field. Some types are: **textbooks, journal articles, histories, criticism, commentaries, and encyclopedias.**

III. FINDING SOURCES

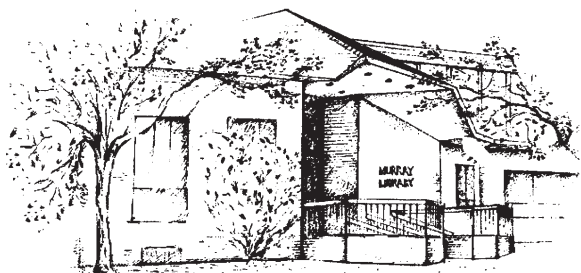
Access tools such as **periodical indexes, bibliographies, and online catalogs** lead to primary or secondary sources. For example, the Library's online catalog will find works **BY** Aristotle (primary source) or works **ABOUT** him (secondary source).

Find primary sources in the Library's online catalog with the following **Boolean Keyword** searches:

- [subject] and (sources or documents)*
- [subject] and (source? or document?)* (catches some additional primary sources and a few irrelevant titles)

e.g. "Great Britain" and (sources or documents)

*in addition to sources or documents, try: correspondence, trials, diaries, personal narratives



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