

Primary vs. Secondary Sources

Which kind of source should I use most? You should use just as many (or more) primary sources than secondary sources.

What if I can't read old handwriting? Speak to your coordinators! We are more than happy to read it and then pull together a typed transcription for you.

What is a Primary Source? Materials that were created during the time of the event or during the time period you're researching

Example: "It is infinitely better to have a few good Men, than many indifferent ones." – letter from George Washington to James McHenry August 10, 1798.

Types of Primary Sources (from the National History Day Rulebook – pg. 9):

- Eyewitness accounts
- Written materials, such as letters, speeches, diaries, newspaper articles, and other documents from the time
- Verbal testimony, such as oral history interviews with people from the time, and oral traditions (i.e. histories that are preserved and shared through word of mouth rather than writing)
- Images and artifacts such as photographs, paintings, drawings, maps, and objects from the time
- Unedited copies of primary materials found on credible internet sites, such as the websites of the National Archives and Records Administration and Library of Congress
- Anything else that provides a first-hand account of your topic

What is a Secondary Source? Materials made/published after a historical event or time period by those who were not present

Example: "... Washington returned to Mount Vernon, fully expecting to go back to private life... When conflict with France loomed...Washington's successor, President John Adams, asked him to come back to act as Commander in Chief of the American Army. Here Washington discusses a plan to begin recruiting for the army..." Editorial Note from the Washington Library on a letter from George Washington to James McHenry August 10, 1798 (same letter as above)

Types of Secondary Sources (from the National History Day Rulebook – pg. 9):

- History textbooks

- Articles in professional journals and books written by historians
- Biographies
- Articles found on credible internet sites

How to Use Each:

- Primary sources enhance your analysis or argument by using the person's own words.
- Secondary sources fill in context (usually provided by historical hindsight)
- An analysis is your argument or what you are trying to say. It usually answers "why do we care?"
- Example of a **primary source**, **secondary source**, and **analysis** in a statement using the examples above:
 - **As stated in an editorial note from the Washington Library, Washington wanted to live out his days on Mount Vernon and not see another conflict. But, his experience in the last war gave him crucial insight into the army and the importance of training that his successors might find helpful. Should war have been the result, this experience could have enabled them to fight more effectively. For Washington, it was "...infinitely better to have a few good Men, than many indifferent ones."** For his successors, Washington was one of those good men and could, once again, help shape the future.