

Primary and Secondary Sources

Primary Sources



Explanation of a primary source - A Primary source is an account made written, recorded or depicted, at the time of an incident, or a document created at or a short period afterwards. It can also be an oral account made at the time, or a short while after the incident, so long as it is verified. It can also include original materials and artefacts that have not been altered or distorted in any way.

Oral - finding someone who was there when it happened and who recalls the events.

Original Documents - parish records, govt reports, birth, marriage certificates

Diaries - because these were written at the time, they can provide lots of particular information.

Journals - including; log books, visitor books, dissertations.

Gravestones - The text on gravestones can often reveal much about family and the status of an individual.

Pictures - Paintings if painted at the time of an event or shortly afterwards can be useful, photographs are also literally snapshots of a moment (though can be staged)

Archaeological remains - everything from the walls of a house to the china and goods within, the structure and materials used, all tell much about the period.

Minutes - Societies, organisations and clubs often keep Minutes of meetings which attempt to record the business transacted and can be a great source of incidental detail.

Adverts - The language used, the images depicted and the items being advertised tell much about the era.

Family papers - Wills, Indenture papers, Deeds of property etc tell much about status and conditions at the time and may even hint at family secrets and feuds as well.

Genealogies - Many genealogical trees are now available online, though for the aristocracy they may well exist in printed form as well.

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Maps - Not only a great source of topographical information of the time, but also a source for alternate naming of places and districts.

Coins - If your writing involves people in a particular period of time, finding out about the coinage will help to contextualise the writing.

Artefacts - Anything from shards of pottery to ornaments in a household, the possessions and obsessions of the people of the time being examined.

Places and structures - from Castles to homes, factories to bridges a sense of place helps tell a story.

Secondary Sources

Explanation of a secondary source - A secondary source is an account, written, recorded or depicted second hand, or some time after an incident or historical moment has elapsed. It can include someone else's research findings and account and can include explanations given by people who were not present, but who heard or knew of someone who was present at the occurrence. Secondary Sources are never viewed as being as sure or reliable as a Primary Source.

Books (text books - even novels) - give a sense of place and time and immersion in such can be very rewarding. History books are a good starting place.

Magazines - Articles in magazines provide a source of researched and a précis of an event or time (but remember the article is only as good as the original researcher)

Newspapers - Give a great world view of a time or incident, but remember newspapers are written to be sold and therefore contain bias and often sensationalise

Biographies - Again these provide a great source of researched material, though the writer may wish to present their subject in the best light, or worst and therefore bias must be the watchword.

Films - Most films are made to entertain, but they often present a recognisable view of a world or incident that is particular to the producer, director, screen writer and author.

Documentaries - Good research should underpin a sound documentary, however every film of this sort has a specific message or opinion to promote.

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Photographs - photographs are literally snapshots of a moment and can reveal a great deal of incidental material such as furnishings, ornaments etc (though remember any photograph can be staged or altered)

Internet - A powerful source of good and bad information.

Where to find Source Material

Libraries

Special Collections

Archives - eg library, local council, special interest, eg military company records.

Newspaper archives - eg Newsquest Online. British Newspaper Archives (paid for service)

Museums - There may even be a specialist museum on the subject you are researching.

Wikipedia - (not always sound)

Dictionaries - both new and older versions and remember many subject specialisms have their own dictionaries (medical, historical, engineering etc)

Encyclopedia - there are many and varied on bookshelves.

Notes on original source material

Golden Rule 1 – if you can't find evidence – don't say it!

Golden Rule 2 – always show your sources (by whatever means suitable)

Glossary - Sometimes it is useful to include a listing of terms and their meanings.

Bibliography - If possible include a full bibliography including : Title, Author, Publishing, edition and ISBN number.