

What is a primary source?

Primary sources are materials directly related to a topic by time or participation. These materials include letters, speeches, diaries, newspaper articles from the time, oral history interviews, documents, photographs, artifacts, or anything else that provides first hand accounts about a person or event.

Some materials might be considered primary sources for one topic but not for another.

For example, a newspaper article about D-Day (which was June 6, 1944) written in June 1944 was likely written by a participant or eyewitness and would be a primary source; an article about D-Day written in June 2001 probably was not written by an eyewitness or participant and would not be a primary source.

Secondary Sources

Secondary sources describe, analyse, interpret or draw conclusions from a primary source. Secondary sources are created after the studied event/work took place or the studied work was created. They can therefore take into consideration other events and place a primary source in its historical context. Secondary sources are not evidence but rather commentary on and discussion of evidence.

The term **secondary source** refers to books, sections of edited books, journal articles, encyclopaedia and dictionary entries, newspaper and magazine reports and so on.

	Primary Sources	Secondary Sources
Arts	Euripides original play "Medea"	Book - <i>Medea and other plays by Euripides</i>
History	Aboriginal Rock Art - Kimberley's	Book - <i>Lost world of the Kimberley: extraordinary glimpses of Australia's ice age ancestors by Ian Wilson</i>
Literature	Shakespeare's manuscript	Book - <i>The best-loved plays of Shakespeare by Abigail Frost</i>
Politics	Political cartoon	Book - <i>Best Australian political cartoons 2008</i>

Evaluating Primary Sources

Evaluation of the sources is essential to scholarly research.

- Who was the author and who was the audience of the primary source?
- What was the purpose of the document or motive for writing it?

Evaluating Secondary Sources

Consider the following when looking for reliable secondary sources:

- Who is the author? Are they a scholar in the field?
- Was the book/ journal published by a scholarly publisher?

- Does the writer have an obvious bias?
- When was this document written, and what was the effect of the document on history?
- What affect did the document have on your view of this topic or event?
- Compare the primary source information with secondary source information.

- What is the purpose of the text or motive for writing it?
- Does the writer have an obvious bias?
- Does the book/ article have an extensive bibliography?
- What are the primary sources referred to by the author?
- What secondary sources are used by the author?
- Does the text have citations enabling you to check the author's sources.