Script for PrimaryNonUS History Resources Tutorial

You will need to use both primary and secondary sources for your history papers and projects. This tutorial will help you learn to distinguish between the two types of sources.

Let’s begin with some definitions and examples!

A primary source in history is a document, image or artifact that was created during the time you’re studying. They provide direct evidence, first hand testimony or an eyewitness account of what happened. Researchers use primary sources when they need the information, data or experience to be as close as possible to what they are studying.

Primary sources can include diaries, letters or memoirs. Other examples include magazine or newspaper articles published at the time of an event, speeches and interviews, legal documents and statistical data. These can be the original items from an archive, items made available through digital sources or original works that have been edited and published. If they’ve been translated into English they still count as primary sources! Visual and audio objects such as photos, art, cloth or artifacts, and decorative objects are also primary sources.

Alternately, secondary sources analyze or interpret an event, phenomenon, person’s life or a creative work and may be written any time afterwards. Scholars who produce secondary sources use primary sources as evidence to support their thesis, argument or point of view.

Secondary sources are usually published as books or journal articles and can include histories, biographies, and criticism.

To show the difference between primary and secondary sources let’s look at some examples.

Let’s say you wanted to research something about William Wilberforce, a British abolitionist in the 18th and early 19th century.

Primary sources for Wilberforce could include books that he wrote such as this Practical View of Christianity. Other sources might be speeches he gave, like a digitized copy of one delivered in 1789, or a Parliamentary debate in which he participated in 1791.

Secondary sources would include biographies such as this first one published in 2007, or a book on the Atlantic slave trade published in 1997. These books were published by scholars many years after Wilberforce lived.

Another secondary source example is this scholarly journal article in the English Historical Review from 2012. How can we tell it’s a secondary source? Well, it’s an interpretation of events, it was published after the fact, and if you look down at the references listed, you’ll see that the author relied on many primary sources to write the article, including newspaper articles and the correspondence of William Wilberforce himself!
The UNCG University Libraries have many tools to help you find primary and secondary sources. One way is to use the research guides for history. Let’s show you how to find those.

From the Libraries home page, click on “Research Guides by Subject.” Then click on “History.”

The History Resources guide provides information on finding a variety of secondary resources including books, journal articles, and many other types of resources.

Let’s click on the primary sources tab. It provides information on finding primary sources in many locations including online collections, the Libraries’ Special Collections Department, periodicals, newspapers, microforms and through our catalog.

This tutorial provides an introduction to identifying primary and secondary sources. It will depend on the class you’re taking and your professor’s requirements as to what resources you should use. For further assistance in finding great resources be sure to consult with your professor. If you have any questions about using the library or the resources available, you can always Ask Us!