

Documents, buildings, people, recordings or any other providers of information used to interpret a topic are sources. It is your job to select the most valuable and important sources for your research. A long list of sources is not valuable unless the historian uses them to explain a point of view. Don't assume that your sources contain the 'truth.' Instead evaluate the information provided.

SECONDARY SOURCES

Materials that explain and interpret an event after it happened are secondary sources. The writer is not an eyewitness or a participant in, the event.

PRIMARY SOURCES

A primary source is information created by the event, or in the process of the event. The writer or speaker must be an eyewitness or participant in the event.

1. SECONDARY SOURCES give you background and lead you to the primary sources.

It's important to start your research journey by looking at some secondary sources. This will help you understand how to place your topic in the larger historical context. History books and other reference materials help you understand why your topic is important and how it relates to economic, social and political developments of the period. A good National History Day project draws on several kinds of secondary sources, in addition to your own original interpretation of primary sources. Look at general reference books to get background on your topic..

At School: A great place to start, you will probably find:

- Encyclopedias
- History textbooks
- General historical works
- Access to the Internet

Move from the general to the specific. A book on the history of your topic will provide more detail than a general textbook. Try a keyword search at a larger library and you'll find dozens of books. Another way to find secondary sources on your topic is to check the notes and bibliographies of books you've already found.

Public Library: You'll find a greater selection of resources here, and possibly access to excellent sources through interlibrary loan. Ask at the circulation or reference desks about interlibrary loan, which is a way to borrow books or even microfilm from libraries all over the country. At a public library, you can find:

- Additional reference books
- General historical works
- Access to the Internet
- Access to interlibrary loan
- Video documentaries
- Clipping files: newspaper and magazine accounts of local events
- Special collections of various resources
- Newspapers and magazines

2. Getting acquainted with PRIMARY SOURCES.

Bibliographies located in the back of general works will lead you to all kinds of interesting primary sources. Here are some basic kinds of primary sources:

University Libraries: Here you'll find an even wider selection, including unique collections and greater access to primary sources. You often cannot check materials out if you are not a university student, so come prepared with change for copying and notebook paper for note taking. You can find:

- History journal articles
- General historical works
- Historical atlases
- Popular magazine collections
- Previous studies of your topic may include some primary sources

3. Digging to finding the PRIMARY SOURCES you need.

Make phone calls, send e-mail, or write to living historical figures--famous and not famous. Contact libraries, local, state, and national historical societies and organizations to find out about their collections. To plan your visit efficiently, take advantage of the catalogues or guides which many libraries, archives, and historical societies have made available online. Visit historic sites related to your topic. In addition to getting a feel for where your event took place and getting visual images if you're doing an exhibit or documentary, take advantage of the resources at historic sites.

Oral history interviews: An oral history interview is a focused interview with someone about his/her past and role in history. (The person needs to have been a participant in the historical event or period you are investigating.)

- Personally conducted interviews
- Collections of oral histories

State and Local Historical Societies and Archives: Ever wonder what's inside those buildings in your community or state capital? Go find out! It's a good idea to do some preliminary research in secondary sources first and maybe make a few phone calls or check out the institution's web site. The more specific you are about what you're looking for, the more helpful the staff of such institutions can be. Also take lots of paper for note taking and some change for copying because the historical documents cannot be checked out. You can find:

- Manuscript Collections
- Letters and Diaries
- Papers of prominent local individuals
- Papers of state and local organizations
- Oral history collections
- Records of government agencies
- Records of births, marriages and deaths
- Collections of photographs
- Brochures and pamphlets
- Reports of state commissions
- Historical object collections

Organizations: Some organizations donate their historical records to historical societies. A few establish their own archival collections. You can call organizations that interest you to find out where their historical records are kept. You can try:

- Churches and synagogues
- Fraternal organizations
- Ethnic societies
- Political parties or other political organizations
- Corporations
- Veterans groups
- Settlement houses or community centers
- Charities

Art Museums: Works of art can serve as primary sources and can add a great deal to the visual dimensions of your project. Check out collections with historical significance:

- Paintings
- Sculptures
- Photographs
- Artifacts

All Around Your Community: History is everywhere! Look around for:

- Personal records, diaries, letters
- Family and household records
- Photo albums
- Home movies and videos
- Historical artifacts: tools, furniture, etc.
- Places with historic significance (such as monuments, homes or public buildings)