

# LESSON: RESEARCH – PRIMARY SOURCES/DOCUMENTS

## Part A: What are primary and secondary sources?

**Essential Questions:** 1. What is a primary source? 2. How is a primary source different from a secondary source?

**Objective:** At the end of this lesson students will be able to determine which source is primary and which is secondary. They will also see the importance of using both types of sources in their research.

**Grade Level:** 6 – 12

**Time Needed:** 50 minutes

**Materials:** Students should bring what they consider primary and secondary sources they have already collected from their research. Teachers should also have on hand a few examples to share with students.

**Note to Teachers:** For building new skills, we recommend having students do quite a bit of secondary research before they proceed to primary source research. This will give them time to be familiar with their topic and understand the context of the primary source.

### Procedure

1. Have students present the sources they brought giving the title, author, and date written.
2. Make a chart on the board of examples of primary and secondary while students share their sources. The **Handout: Primary and Secondary Sources** provides a chart of sample sources.
3. Share the definition of primary and secondary sources and give examples. Make sure to ask for questions and give explanations of the differences.
  - a. **Primary Source:** Primary sources provide first-hand testimony or direct evidence concerning a topic under investigation. They are created by witnesses or recorders who experienced the events or conditions being documented. Often these sources are created at the time when the events or conditions are occurring, but primary sources can also include autobiographies, memoirs, and oral histories recorded later. Primary sources are characterized by their content, regardless of whether they are available in original format, in microfilm/microfiche, in digital format, or in published format. (Source: [www.yale.edu](http://www.yale.edu))
  - b. **Secondary Source:** A secondary source interprets and analyzes primary sources. These sources are one or more steps removed from the event. (Source: <http://www.princeton.edu/~refdesk/primary2.html>)
4. Have the students get into pairs to discuss the primary and secondary sources they brought. As a pair, they should decide which is really primary and secondary, why they classified it that way, and how they can find more of one or the other.
5. As students are categorizing sources, they can use the **Worksheet; Analyzing Primary Documents** to begin evaluating what the primary sources mean. Questions include:
  - a. Who wrote the document? Who is the document about?
  - b. What is the purpose of this document?
  - c. When was the document written? Is this document also referring to another time period?

- d. Where was this document created? (Think about the city, state, country.) Is the place that the document was created also the same audience at which the author was directing the document?
  - e. Why was this document written?
  - f. What makes this document unique?
  - g. What kind of language is being used?
6. Have students present new findings, while changing the information on the board.
  - a. What are the expectations of the author?
  - b. Who is the intended audience of the document?
  - c. What is the perspective of the author?
7. Discuss as a class what they have discovered today and then suggest where to find primary sources. *What have your secondary sources told you about primary sources? Using the sources you already have, figure out three to five primary sources that will be helpful and where you can find them.*

### Lesson Extension/Alternative

**Primary Source Research Starting Points:** Each student's topic will lead them in different directions for their research. Consider providing a general list of places they can consider finding sources. The **Handout: Online Resources for National History Day Research** is a good general listing of online research sources.

**Primary Sources in the Real World:** Contact an historian, a history professor, a history graduate student, scientist, lawyer, a police officer, or anyone who needs to gather evidence for their research or job. As a class, come up with questions to ask the visitor. Questions about how they use evidence or support to do their work.

Examples:

- What is your job?
- How did you become educated for your job? (School, training, etc.)
- How do you use evidence in your job?
- Why do you need evidence or support in your job?
- How do you use the two kinds of sources (primary and secondary) together?