

Name: _____

Period: _____

Date: _____

Understand the Difference: Primary versus Secondary Sources

*Libraries and archives hold objects, like documents and books, which help us to find out what happened in the past. One way to organize these objects is to divide them into **primary** and **secondary** sources. What makes an object a primary source or a secondary source often depends on how **you** use it.*

Primary and secondary sources, when used together, help us to understand people, ideas and events from the past.

Primary Sources

People use original, first-hand accounts as building blocks to create stories from the past. These accounts are called primary sources, because they are the first evidence of something happening, or being thought or said.

Primary Sources are created at the time of an event, or very soon after something has happened. These sources are often rare or one-of-a-kind. However, some primary sources can also exist in many copies, if they were popular and widely available at the time that they were created.

All of the following can be primary sources:

- Diaries
- Letters
- Photographs
- Art
- Maps
- Video and film
- Sound recordings
- Interviews
- Newspapers
- Magazines
- Published first-hand accounts, or stories

Secondary Sources

Second-hand, published accounts are called secondary sources. They are called secondary sources because they are created **after** primary sources and they often use or talk about primary sources. Secondary sources can give additional opinions (sometimes called bias) on a past event or on a primary source. Secondary sources often have many copies, found in libraries, schools or homes.

All of the following can be secondary sources, if they tell of an event that happened a while ago:

- History textbooks
- Biographies
- Published stories
- Movies of historical events
- Art
- Music recordings

When Is a Primary Source Not a Primary Source?

You may have noticed that some things are on both the lists of primary and secondary sources. This isn't a mistake. The difference between a primary and secondary source is often determined by how they were originally created and how you use them.

Here's an example: a painting or a photograph is often considered a primary source, because paintings and photographs can illustrate past events as they happened and people as they were at a particular time. However, not all artworks and photographs are considered primary sources as they may have been created after the event or by someone who was not actually there.

And Now the Most Important Question: Who Cares?

What's the big deal over primary and secondary sources anyway? Why should you care, especially if adults can't even make up their minds which is which?

A German historian, over 100 years ago, said it was important to write about the past, "As it really happened." Most people today agree that it is impossible to know what exactly happened in history. (Most people can't remember exactly what happened last week, let alone a long time ago!) However, if we aren't careful about the facts, we can really make a mess and even create some big lies about the past.

Think of it like playing the telephone game. That's the game where you whisper something in a friend's ear that they have to repeat to another friend, and so on. It works for the first little while, but the chance of someone getting it wrong increases with the number of people who repeat it. Going back to primary sources is like going back to the first person in the telephone game. Doing research is all about trust. If you trust the person who created a secondary source, then there isn't a problem about using it. However, if you don't trust that person, if you think their version is exaggerated or biased, or if you want to see the original evidence for yourself, then you have to go to the primary sources.

Checklist

Primary sources:	Secondary sources:
<ul style="list-style-type: none">created at the time of an event, or very soon after	<ul style="list-style-type: none">created after event; sometimes a long time after something happened
<ul style="list-style-type: none">created by someone who saw or heard an event themselves	<ul style="list-style-type: none">often uses primary sources as examples
<ul style="list-style-type: none">often one-of-a-kind, or rare	<ul style="list-style-type: none">expresses an opinion or an argument about a past event
<ul style="list-style-type: none">letters, diaries, photos and newspapers (can all be primary sources)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">history text books, historical movies and biographies (can all be secondary sources)