

Finding Primary Sources

What are Primary Sources?

Primary sources are:

- materials created by participants or witnesses of the event(s) under study
- original records created at the time the historical events occurred (or after in the case of memoirs)
- raw data for the historian

Some Examples of Primary Sources:

Letters, diaries, legal documents, wills, paintings, weapons, photographs, speeches, interviews, manuscripts, tools, and other documents and objects created at the time of the events under study.

How Do I Find Primary Sources?

Use Griffin, Summit, and WorldCat to search for books and documents:

- Search for books written by key participants and organizations.
- Do a keyword search and limit your search by publication date.
- Do a keyword search for your subject and add terms that are likely to return primary sources:
 - sources
 - personal narratives
 - diary/diaries
 - correspondence
 - interviews
 - church records and registers
 - early works to 1800
 - wills
 - probate records
 - speech/speeches
 - sermons
- Look at the publication dates of the book and the birth/death dates of the author.
- Look at notes in the record, there may be notes in the record that describe the material and give clues as to whether or not it is a primary source. For instance, if there is a note indicating that the work is a facsimile or a reprint, then you *may* have a primary source.
- When looking for reproductions of paintings or other illustrations, look in the detailed record of the book for words like “ill.” or “plates” or “maps”.

Questions? Please contact the library at 360-546-9694 or library@vancouver.wsu.edu or send us an instant message: AIM and Yahoo!: wsuvlibrary MSN: library@vancouver.wsu.edu

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Finding Primary Sources on the Web:

Look to see if there are any major collections of primary sources from the place/time you're researching. The work of the historian often involves trips to archives where primary sources are held. Happily, many archives and libraries have begun to digitize their holdings, making it easier for the history student to "visit" far-flung archives.

Some places to start:

EuroDocs: Primary Historical Documents from Western Europe
http://eudocs.lib.byu.edu/index.php/Main_Page

SUNSite Digital Collections (for example, the Digital Scriptorium)
<http://sunsite.berkeley.edu/Collections/>

The Avalon Project at Yale Law School
<http://www.yale.edu/lawweb/avalon/avalon.htm>

History Sources at AcademicInfo (watch out, lots of ads!)
<http://www.academicinfo.net/histaalibrary.html>

History at the Librarians' Index to the Internet. (focus on US and California history)
<http://lii.org/> select "History" (see especially Archives, Diaries, & Primary Sources subtopics)

Internet History Sourcebooks Project
<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/>

Finally, search engines are useful when researching a narrow topic or trying to locate a specific document. Try including words like "primary sources", "primary documents", "digital archives", "archives", etc.

A couple of things to remember about websites:

- websites associated with archives might not be available in English
- websites might include only transcriptions
- you must take extra care to evaluate the sources you find on the web
- some digital archives can be very complex to search, requiring the same kinds of skills that would be required of the historian working in a physical archives.

The website "Using Primary Sources on the Web" has more about how to effectively evaluate and find primary sources on the web:

<http://www.lib.washington.edu/subject/History/RUSA/>

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