



National History Day in Nevada

Primary and Secondary Source Documents



The story of the past is told through information gathered from primary and secondary sources. Secondary sources are accounts created by individuals who were NOT eyewitnesses to or participants in the events they recorded. These sources include textbooks, magazine articles, books written about past events, and encyclopedias. Secondary sources are especially important for developing an understanding of the historical context of the event, person, or idea that is the focus of research.

Primary sources are original documents, official records, or physical objects created by individuals who participated in or witnessed past events. Virtually anything from the time period being studied can be a primary source, including written documents, photographs, audio or film recordings, works of art, household furnishings, personal belongings, and even buildings.

Using primary sources, students can interpret history through the eyes and experiences of the people who actually lived it. Primary sources enlarge students' view of history, making it more than simply a series of facts and dates. Analyzing primary sources helps students establish historical context and attach meaning and significance to basic facts.

Primary sources should never be taken solely at face value. Informed, critical, objective evaluation is essential. Primary sources are pieces of historical evidence that are subject to interpretation. Every historian's challenge is to establish the authenticity of each primary source and to determine how it reflects the personal, social, political, or economic perspective of its creator. At the same time, every historian must be acutely aware of the bias that her or she brings to the interpretation process. Individual life experiences influence what we observe in documents and the meaning we ascribe to primary sources.

By integrating primary sources in classroom instruction, teachers encourage students to think and research as historians do. Students who engage in historical research discover evidence that enables them to form generalizations, challenge data, and confirm or refute conclusions. In doing so students develop an awareness of history and an informed perspective on the past and on the many ways in which it influences the present.

Primary sources may include but are not limited to:

account books	flags	personal belongings
advertisements	household furnishings	photographs
architectural plans	interviews	poetry
artwork	inventories	posters
buildings	manuscripts	quotations
cartoons	maps	receipts
census records	memoirs	recipes
clothing	music	research data
coins and currency	newspapers	speeches
correspondence	obituaries	tombstones
court records	oral histories	tools
diaries and journals	pamphlets	wills



The Stuff History is made of -- Some Primary Sources

Formal Personal Documents

- Contracts
- Agreements
 - Wills
- Court Records
- Certificates
 - Licenses
 - Receipts

Institutional Records

- Charters
- Constitutions
- Membership Registers
 - Minutes
- Correspondence
 - Reports
 - Programs
 - Publications
 - Records

Informal Personal Records

- Diaries
- Memoirs
- Financial Statements
 - Letters
- Memoranda
 - Notes
- Family & Household Records
 - Photo Albums
 - Home Movies/Videos

Government Documents

- Court Proceedings
 - Law & Edicts
- Constitutions
 - Reports
- Proceedings
 - Treaties
 - Records
- Census Data

The Arts

- Fine Arts
- Graphic Arts
 - Music
 - Design
- Photography

Publications

- Treatises
- Periodicals
- Newspapers
- Histories/Biographies
 - Travel Accounts
 - Literature
 - Maps

Artifacts

- Tools & Machines
- Money & Stamps
 - Containers
- Furniture & Furnishings
- Clothing & Personal Care Items
 - Toys and Amusements
- Transportation Equipment
- Communication Equipment
 - Architecture

Popular Culture

- Folklore
- Mass Media
- Organized Sports
- Songs & Hymns
- Advertising