

Continue



Primary source example

Primary sources are pieces of data directly connected to an event. Generally, the source was created at the time in which the event occurred. A primary source is generally understood in contrast to a secondary source, which is a source that reports on and makes comments on primary sources after the fact. Primary sources should reveal new data about something. By contrast, secondary sources simply comment on or re-examine existing data. However, as we'll explore, the distinction between primary and secondary sources becomes very unclear very quickly. This is because context and the scholarly field of study matter in defining something as a primary vs secondary source. Artifacts in archeology are objects crafted by humans. Examples of artifacts include tools, pottery, and arrowheads that are found in excavations. These artifacts provide new first-hand accounts of what life was like at the time. They aren't recounts or reflections. They're the actual physical objects from the era. They're therefore considered primary sources for analysis. When an artifact reveals information about the culture of the time, we call it a cultural artifact. Examples of cultural artifacts include artworks and children's toys found in a dig. Audio recordings of an event are considered primary sources. For example, recorded audio of Richard Nixon taking in the oval office during the watergate scandal is a primary source: it is literally a recording of him committing a crime. However, audio recordings of interviews with people after the event (such as an interview that takes place 2 weeks after something has happened) could be primary or secondary, depending on the context and academic discipline. In many cases post-event interviews are seen as secondary because they do not occur concurrent with the occasion. Hindsight and memory are too imperfect to consider this a primary source. In other cases, audio recordings such as interviews taken after an event are most certainly primary sources. For example, interview research in social science research is generally seen as primary research (as opposed to, for example, a literature review, which is considered secondary research). Autobiographies and memoirs are considered primary sources in instances where someone is studying the life of the writer. In these cases, those accounts of a person by a person are direct reports that can give new insights or direct clarity about the person. By contrast, a biography (a story written by an author about someone else) would be considered a secondary source because it is a journalistic piece written about rather than by the person. Biofacts are organic matter found in archeological excavations. They differ from artifacts because they're not just crafted by humans; they're actually natural objects like bones and shells. A biofact, such as the bones of an Egyptian mummy, can reveal direct and unfiltered information about the people of the times. For example, they can give us unambiguous information about the height of humans during an era, how a human died, or whether a culture of humans in the past created jewelry out of shells. A diary is arguably a better version of primary data than a memoir and further down the scale toward a primary source and away from a secondary source. This is because diaries are usually written at the time of the event. They are written when the memory of things are fresh in the mind of the writer, meaning there is less fog of time and less time for memory to fade or change. Emails are records of events that took place at the time in which they were occurring. An email can therefore form compelling evidence that can be revealing of the thought processes of people under study. They can, for example, be produced as primary evidence during court hearings about a dispute between two people emailing one another. Emails may become secondary sources if they are simply a typed-out opinion on an event. In this case, the opinionated email is only secondary data about the event on which a person is speaking as it's not connected to the event directly. In archeology, a feature is an immovable contextual piece found during an archeological survey. They help reveal information about the time and place. Examples of features include hearths, remains of walls, and remains of firepits. They can help reveal information about the architecture of the day, how people cooked, and how large settlements were within a geographical area. Government documents, such as records of births, deaths, and marriages, are primary sources about a time and place. Historians look back at government documents from civilizations of the past to get information about the size of cities, the health of their citizens, and so forth. In hundreds or thousands of years in the future, future civilizations may look at government records of today to get first-hand information about our society, as well. If you conduct an interview yourself and use it as data in a research study, then that interview is generally considered a primary source of data. Interviews are, in fact, some of the most common ways to conduct primary research for undergraduate research students. They can be an integral part of straightforward qualitative research studies to help ease students into the world of primary research. In some instances and by some academic standards, such as if an interview is a person's recount of an event and you are analyzing "what happened during an event", then it may be a secondary source. But if the study is of "15 people's opinions of an event", then the interview in which they share their opinions will be a primary source. Here, you can see that the research question (whether the focus is on the event or opinions of the event) is important in determining whether some things are primary or secondary sources. A letter posted from one person to another can be a primary source for a historian looking to unveil new information about their relationship. For example, love letters between couples separated during WWII would be compelling primary sources for a historian writing a book about soldiers and their wives during the war. Similarly, were a biographer to find a letter of invitation for a person to attend a university, then that letter of invitation is compelling primary evidence that would confirm that they had, in fact, been accepted to study there. Manuscripts are the original copies of a book or essay. They can be extremely revealing of original data that took place before it had become distorted through transcriptions. Historically, they were the original pieces written by hand before the manuscript was typed out and printed. Today, they can be the drafts written on a computer before editors requested edits. One example of the search for the original manuscripts is the bible. The original manuscripts of many books of the bible are missing. People search out those manuscripts to find the exact original text given that meaning may have been lost over time with so much transcription over time. Original maps, such as the maps drawn by explorers like Christopher Columbus and Captain James Cook, can reveal important first-hand information about the travels of those explorers. These maps might be able to reveal information about what people were thinking at a certain time, their knowledge of their terrain, and even the extent of expansion of cities at certain times. Similarly, a map of a city from a particular year might reveal information about when some shops opened and when buildings were constructed. Metadata is data that gives contextual information about the data. The best example is images on the internet. The image is the data, but the image file also contains information like: The name of the file When the file was created Where the file was created Who created the photo (often called the alt tag) This metadata can be extremely useful when doing forensic analysis. For example, if detectives are trying to determine the sequence of events for a crime, they can look through phone records to identify where a person was at a certain time based on the metadata saying when, where, and to whom they made phone calls. This metadata can help place someone at a crime scene or, alternatively, help exonerate someone from a crime by proving their alibi. Old magazine clippings can give us great insights into the events of the past. When examining an event, the magazine clipping reporting on the event can be a very close proximate and contextual element worthy of first-hand analysis. For example, magazine clippings of the days leading up to the first world war could be excellent primary sources when examining the social milieu at the time when the war began. Photographs capture an exact moment in history. Everything within the scene can give some first-hand context that we can learn from. This primary data can be used when gathering information about the exact aftermath of an event, people's guttural reactions (through examining facial expressions), and even the finer details of the interiors of a house. They could, similarly, reveal first-hand data about the fashion of a time. Raw research data, such as the raw data from a survey, scientific analysis, poll, or other quantitative studies, acts as a primary source. Other examples include test results, protein and genetic sequences, audiotapes, questionnaires, and field notes. This research data often needs to be interpreted by trained scientists and researchers. Sometimes, primary data is extremely difficult to interpret, which is why secondary sources are often necessary (i.e. sources that interpret, analyze, and present the primary data through their own studies and journalism). Social media posts are some of the newest examples of primary sources that are coming back to bite people these days. Politicians, actors, and public figures have their old social media posts scoured for embarrassing or offensive comments. These posts are presented as firm evidence of the opinions and behaviors of a person at a specific time in their lives. Famous speeches from history are regularly used as first-hand accounts of events. Speeches such as the Gettysburg address are transcribed and kept as the raw primary data. To this day, those speeches act as the closest accounts we can get to the exact words and thoughts of the person. Today, a speech may be saved in audio or video form, making it an even more authoritative source. Statistics can provide objective data from a time and place. They can help us piece together history via a first-hand account taken at the time of the event. For example, historical censuses allow us to not only know about the population data of a country at a certain time in history, but they allow us to map how fast populations have grown and make projections about population growth into the future. One example of an early census is the Chinese census that took place in the year 2 CE. This census found that there were 57,671,400 individuals living in 12,366,470 households. Another famous census was William the Conqueror's census of 1086 in England, nicknamed the Domesday Book. The purpose of this census was to determine how many people he could tax after taking over the country following the Battle of Hastings. In the natural sciences, reports that deliver the findings of research data (including, most commonly, academic peer-reviewed journal articles) are considered primary sources. This is because the reports present findings of a first-hand study, rather than (for example) reviews of literature or syntheses of other people's data. Similarly, in journalism, an academic report will be considered primary data whereas a journalistic article discussing an academic report would be secondary. Therefore, journalists generally aim to find and read the original report (aka primary source) rather than citing other people who cite something. Video of famous events can help reveal first-hand information about the event, much like photos. An example of a video recording that can act as a primary source is CCTV footage. This may be usable, for example, in the court of law, and can hold sway when convicting someone. For videos and photographs, however, it's important to think about what's outside of the frame of the scene. Even a primary source needs to be examined critically. Primary sources are generally believed to be more authoritative than secondary sources. However, they're also very difficult to interpret, making secondary sources necessary. Furthermore, different scholarly, academic, and journalistic traditions will have different ideas about what a primary source really is. As a result, some of the examples of primary sources in this list will not be suitable in all traditions.