

# How to...

## DISTINGUISH BETWEEN PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SOURCES

### Primary Sources

A primary source is a firsthand testimony or direct evidence concerning a topic under investigation. Primary sources are written or created during the time period being studied, or by a person directly involved in the event. The nature and value of the sources cannot be determined without reference to the topic and question it is meant to answer. Primary sources offer an inside view of a particular event or time period. Some types of primary sources are:

#### Original Documents

Diaries  
Speeches  
Letters  
Minutes  
Interviews  
Research Data  
News Film Footage  
Autobiographies

#### Creative Works

Novels  
Music  
Films  
Visual Art  
Poetry  
Performing Arts

#### Artifacts

Jewelry  
Tools  
Pottery  
Clothing  
Buildings  
Furniture

#### **Examples:**

*Diary of Ann Frank* - experience of Jews in World War II; *The Declaration of Independence* - United States History; *Arrowheads and pottery* - Native American history

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### Secondary Sources

A Secondary source interprets and analyzes primary sources. Secondary sources are one step removed from the primary sources. Some types of secondary sources are:

Textbooks  
Criticism  
Biographies

Journal Articles  
Commentaries

Histories  
Encyclopedias

#### **Examples:**

*Thomas Jefferson: A Life* - a biography of Thomas Jefferson; *The Encyclopedia of Education* - brief treatments of educational topic; *Introduction to Psychology* - Psychology textbook

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### Primary Sources on the Web

These are some examples of sites where you can find primary sources.

- [American Memory](http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/)  
The Library of Congress's National Digital Library contains more than 40 collections, which feature historical photos, maps, documents, letters, speeches, recordings, videos, prints, and more. **<http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/>**
- [Documenting the American South](http://metalab.unc.edu/docsouth/)  
This electronic text archive from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill contains primary source slavery narratives and first-person narratives of the South as well as a digitized library of southern literature. **<http://metalab.unc.edu/docsouth/>**
- [National Museum of American Art](http://nmaa-ryder.si.edu/)  
This museum site offers online exhibitions of American art. **<http://nmaa-ryder.si.edu/>**