Primary Sources

Primary sources are firsthand accounts or records of events in history. These sources reflect the point of view of a participant or observer at a particular point of time. There are a wide range of primary source materials available for historical research. For example:

- Magazines, newspapers, books, and pamphlets written and published during a particular time period
- Diaries, letters, or papers usually written for personal reasons. Some of these may have been published later, usually after the writer's death.
- Reports and records such as census data or minutes of an organization
- Autobiographies and memoirs often written long after the events took place and therefore, may be somewhat less reliable.
- Photos, audio recordings, movies, buildings, and other physical objects may also reveal information about the time period and popular culture

Compilations of primary sources such as a book containing many short excerpts from primary sources are not as useful as the original sources themselves.

Source materials may have a bias or purpose which you should be aware of. For example, an article from a northern paper during the civil war will read much differently than an article from a southern paper. When reading primary sources, think about why the piece was written, when it was written, and what it tells us about the writer and the time period.

Finding primary source materials

Our libraries have a good collection of primary source materials that continues to grow as we add titles that help students with their research. To search the library catalog for primary source materials, try adding the following subheadings to your search term or topic:

- diaries
- personal narratives
- documents
- sources
- letters
- correspondence
- oral history
- pamphlets
- interviews
- speeches
- autobiography

Some print journals and magazines in the library collection go back to the 1960s and some library databases also contain primary source materials.

For more information and internet sites with digital collections, see the Primary Sources Research Guide [http://libguides.madisoncollege.edu/primary](http://libguides.madisoncollege.edu/primary). The other history research guides, and the digital collections research guide, also have links to some digitized collections of primary source documents.