Primary and Secondary Sources

INTRODUCTION

What is a primary source?

The definition of a primary source varies depending upon the academic discipline and the context in which it is used.

- In the **humanities**, a primary source could be defined as something that was created either during the time period being studied or afterward by individuals reflecting on their involvement in the events of that time.

- In the **social sciences**, the definition of a primary source would be expanded to include numerical data that has been gathered to analyze relationships between people, events, and their environment.

- In the **natural sciences**, a primary source could be defined as a report of original findings or ideas. These sources often appear in the form of research articles with sections on methods and results.

Primary sources in context

The nature of a source is determined by the way a researcher makes use of it. The same item might be considered a primary source in one investigation and a secondary source in another. For example, a speech about the Declaration of Independence that was delivered by a noted statesman on its hundredth anniversary would be secondary source for a scholar studying the document’s philosophical origins. But, it would be a primary source for a scholar studying how the Declaration’s meaning has changed for Americans over time.

The value of a source is also determined by its use. A memoir written by a signer of the Declaration of Independence years after the event would be of much more importance to a historian studying the debates of the Continental Congress than would the diary entry of an individual who lived in Philadelphia in 1776, but had no personal interaction with the Congress or its members.¹

Examples by discipline

The sources available to you in your undergraduate research could often be more accurately described as primary source surrogates. For example, instead of examining an individual's diary directly, you may find yourself using reproduced images of its pages—or, more likely yet, a typed transcription of its contents. Or, instead of experiencing a sculpture firsthand, you may be dependent upon photographs of it. Obviously, some primary source surrogates are better than others.

If you are unsure of what would be considered a primary source for your particular project, ask your professor for examples. The following is an incomplete list of things that might be considered primary sources by different academic disciplines.

- **Anthropology**
  - artifact, field notes, fossil, photograph

- **Art**
  - architectural model or drawing, building or structure, letter, motion picture, organizational records, painting, personal account, photograph, print, sculpture, sketch book

- **Biology**
  - field notes, plant specimen, research report

- **Economics**
  - company statistics, consumer survey, data series

- **Engineering**
  - building or structure, map, geological survey, patent, schematic drawing, technical report

- **Government**
  - government report, interview, letter, news report, personal account, press release, public opinion survey, speech, treaty or international agreement

- **History**
  - artifact, diary, government report, interview, letter, map, news report, oral history, organizational records, photograph, speech, work of art

- **Law**
  - code, statute, court opinion, legislative report

- **Literature**
  - contemporary review, interview, letter, manuscript, personal account, published work

- **Music**
  - contemporary review, letter, personal account, score, sound recording

- **Psychology**
  - case study, clinical case report, experimental replication, follow-up study, longitudinal study, treatment outcome study

- **Sociology**
  - cultural artifact, interview, oral history, organizational records, statistical data, survey (1)
So then what is a secondary source?
Secondary Sources analyze or interpret an historical event or artistic work. Secondary sources often base their theories and arguments on the direct evidence found in primary sources. A secondary work for a subject is one that discusses the subject but is written after the time contemporary with it.  

How do I find primary sources at Heterick Memorial Library?
The library has available a variety of newspapers, government documents and books. Many of the newspapers and government documents are available in microfiche or microfilm form. These are available for library use only in the Microform/Copier room located adjacent to the Circulation area.

I. Using the HML catalog, POLAR for finding Primary Resources

A. From any computer, go to the library homepage at www.onu.edu\library click on the Library catalog button

**AUTHOR** search: to find materials someone has written

**KEYWORD** search: combine a topic, keyword, or person’s name with any of the following -- autobiography, personal narratives, letters, correspondence, diaries, or memoirs.

Tip: "sources" is the official subject sub-heading used in POLAR to describe primary sources. e.g. The subject heading "Crusades--Sources" indicates the work contains primary sources on the crusades.

- If you do not have a title, you can elect to do an **author**, **subject** or **keyword** search
- **Author search** is most effect when you are searching for a diary, personal papers, personal narrative or letters.
- Other **subject** headings to use include
  - Personal narratives (239 entries)
  - Diaries (333 entries)
  - Letters (124) entries

---

These subject headings are most useful when attached to a person or even time period.

- Keyword searching is a good way to locate documents about an event or place. You can combine the person or topic you are looking for with words such as diaries, narratives, letters, correspondence, manuscripts, papers, interviews and newspapers. These terms often indicate primary sources.

The Library Archives contain official documents from the university’s past as well many miscellaneous items such as primary source materials on local history. These documents will display the location as Archives/Rare books or ONU Collection. Please contact the librarian on duty for more information on how to access materials from this collection.

There are also a variety of databases from which you may find primary sources. Visit the library homepage, click on the Periodical Articles link and then the subject heading for your particular discipline or area of interest.

**Reference librarians are available most hours the library is open so do not hesitate to ask for help.**