

USING PRIMARY and SECONDARY RESOURCES

(adapted from Berkeley's Library Research Guide at
lib.berkeley.edu/TeachingLib/Guides/PrimarySources.html)

What are PRIMARY RESOURCES?

- **Diaries, journals, speeches, interviews, letters, manuscripts,** and other papers in which individuals describe events in which they were participants or observers.
- **Memoirs and autobiographies:** these may not be reliable as they often were written a long time after the fact. Still, they sometimes are the only available source for information.
- **Records of organizations & government agencies:** minutes, reports, correspondence serve as an ongoing record of the activity and thinking of that organization. Many of these (births, deaths, marriages; permits & licenses issued; census data, etc.) document conditions in that society.
- **Published materials:** this includes books, magazine and journal articles, newspaper articles *written at the time* about a particular event. Sometimes participants wrote these accounts, but in most cases journalists or other observers penned them. "It is important to distinguish between material written at the time of the event as a kind of report, and material written much later, as historical analysis."
- **Photographs, audio recordings, movies or video recordings,** documenting what happened.
- **Artifacts of all kinds:** physical objects, buildings, furniture, tools, appliances or household items, clothing, toys.
- **Research reports** in the sciences or social sciences. These may be in the form of social science surveys or research studies. This is generally in book form, government reports, or most commonly in articles published in scholarly journals.
- Psychology of a time or of a group can be found in instruments such as **public opinion polls** taken at the time. These may be limited in availability, so it may be necessary to turn to ideas and images conveyed in the mass media, and even in literature, film, popular fiction, self-help literature, textbooks, etc. Use these as evidence of how people were thinking.

What are SECONDARY SOURCES?

A secondary source is a work that interprets or analyzes an historical event or phenomenon. It is generally at least one step removed from the event. An article that analyzes the relationship between the feminist movement and the labor movement in Victorian England is an example of a secondary source. Textbooks and encyclopedias are other examples.

To find secondary sources, look in the library catalog for monographs on a particular subject, or electronic indexes such as *Historical Abstracts*, *America: History & Life*, *JSTOR*

(On the library web page under Databases at lib.newpaltz.edu)

Finding the Right Reference Source

This can be an excellent starting place for getting an overview of a particular topic. You can identify key participants, dates and publications associated with it.

Pick out **names** of people, organizations, government agencies that were participants. Look for **publications** such as reports, newsletters, magazines, pamphlets, etc. that they may have produced in conjunction with the event/s you are researching.

Ask a librarian or your professor to suggest reference sources, such as **subject-specific encyclopedias, chronologies or factbooks** that will give you an overview. If you already have people in mind, **biographical dictionaries** and encyclopedias will give you background information and bibliographies of primary and secondary sources.

Books and journal articles (especially those with extensive biographies) and other secondary sources can give background information and clues.

Specialized bibliographies and guides to research often give both an introductory overview of how to go about researching a particular topic as well as list specific primary and secondary sources.

Specialized encyclopedias, chronologies and factbooks (examples):

- ❖ Encyclopedia of American Cultural & Intellectual History [Ref E169.1.E624 2001]
- ❖ Encyclopedia of New York City [Ref F 128.3 .E75 1995]
- ❖ Gazetteer of the State of New York 1824 [Ref F117.S74 1981]
- ❖ Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups [Ref E184 .A1 H35]
- ❖ Encyclopedia of the Confederacy [Ref E487 .E55 1993]
- ❖ The War of the Rebellion: a compilation of the official records of the Union and Confederate Armies. 70 v. [Rare E464.U6]

Biographical sources (examples):

- ❖ Current Biography (1940 - present) [Ref CT100 .C8]
- ❖ Dictionary of American Biography [Ref E 176 .D56]

Bibliographies and guides to research (examples):

- ❖ Civil War Manuscripts: a guide to collections in the manuscript division of the Library of Congress [Stacks E468 .L52 1985]
- ❖ Directory of Historical Organizations in the United States and Canada [Ref E172.D5 15th ed.] (American Association for State and Local History)
- ❖ Guide to Historical Resources in Ulster County New York Repositories [Ref F119.G84 1980 v. 51]

STRATEGIES FOR FINDING PRIMARY SOURCES

1. Use the STL Catalog to find materials in this library.
 - a. Look up people, organizations or agencies
Use **STL Catalog** to look up the people, organizations and agencies as "authors." Materials that were written or produced by them - either at the time of the event or later - will, in most cases, be primary resources.

For example, look up individual names as *author*:

Bevier, Katherine
Schama, Simon
Thompson, Edgar Tristram

- b. Search by *Subject begins with*, if you believe your topic is a **Library of Congress Subject Heading**. To find primary sources on a subject, you must first identify the Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH). LC Subject Headings are standardized terms developed by the Library of Congress to describe materials listed in catalogs. To determine the appropriate subject headings associated with your topic you can:
 1. Ask a librarian.
 2. Look in the four red volumes of the Library of Congress Subject Headings located near the DYNIX terminals on the main floor of the library.
 3. Look up the catalog record of a book you already know about, display the record, and look to see the subject headings associated with that work

You can pair your subject heading with specific subheadings that identify materials as primary sources. Some of these are:

Correspondence
Diaries
Early works to 1800
Interviews
Pamphlets
Periodicals
Personal narratives
Sources

Append any of the above subheadings with a LC Subject Heading to search for primary source material. For example:

Delaware & Hudson Canal (N.Y. and PA) OR
Canals New York State
Sephardim New York (NY) Biography
Slavery NY State Ulster County
New Paltz State University College

2. Go to Special Collections of Primary Source Material

Go to libraries which have special collections of manuscripts, papers, organizational records, ephemera or other unpublished material relating to the people, organizations, and agencies involved in the events.

Some special collections have been digitized, such as the Library of Congress' **American Memory Collection** (memory.loc.gov/), the Rediscovering New York section of the New York State Archives (www.archives.nysed.gov) .

3. Use periodical and newspaper indexes covering the time period

Historical NY Times database

<http://proquest.umi.com/pgdweb?RQT=403&DBId=6861&cfc=1#sform>

4. Find Public Opinion Polls from the Time Period

Some of the important sources for polls are:

- American Public Opinion Index

OR

Consult Lexis-Nexis Academic Universe (electronic database) for more recent polls and surveys

5. Use indexes to Government Documents

Publications generated by a government agency, public records, reports and statistics such as census records, laws, Supreme Court decisions and treaties, are excellent sources of primary materials.

- GPO [<http://www.gpoaccess.gov/multidb.html>]
- United States Census [<http://www.census.gov/>]
- Stat USA [<http://www.stat-usa.gov/>]

6. Identify popular fiction, plays, entertainment from the time period

Consult one of the following indexes:

- Short Story Index
- Play Index
- Fiction Catalog