Memorial University Libraries

How to Find Primary Sources (History)

What are primary and secondary sources?

Primary sources are:
- materials created by participants or witnesses of the event(s) under study
- raw data for the historian

Secondary sources are:
- works that discuss a subject, but which are written after the time that the event(s) occurred - [by someone other than an eyewitness]
- works that contain explanations/judgements of past events
- works that explain or interpret primary sources

What are some examples of primary sources?

Official records:	cabinet papers	diplomatic dispatches
	laws	parish records
	parliamentary debates	ambassador's reports
	treaties	

Printed sources:	newspapers	speeches
	autobiographies	pamphlets/treatises

Private sources:	letters	diaries

How do I find primary sources?

1. Use the Library Catalogue to find books related to your topic.

   - Use keywords that describe your topic together with any/some of the following words:

Autobiography/Autobiographies   Letter/Letters
Biography   Personal narratives
Correspondence   Public opinion
Diary/Diaries   Sources
Interview/Interviews   Speech/Speeches
Journal

Example: **cold war and (letters or narratives or correspondence)**
and click on: Search Everything

- Look at the **publication dates** of the book and the **birth/death dates** of the author:

The date of the **original publication** may give you an indication that you have a primary source. Look for the publication date or a note about the original publication.
If the birth and death dates of the author are such that he/she lived during the time of your event you may have a primary source.

- Look at **notes** in the record:

There may be notes in the record which describe the material and give clues as to whether or not it is a primary source. For instance, if there is a note indicating that the work is a **facsimile** or a **reprint**, then you may have a primary source.

2. Use a newspaper index to locate newspaper articles. Use the index for the years when your event took place.

- The Library has a number of such indexes, including:

  The New York Times Index (1851-   Ref AI 21 N44
  The QEII Library has the newspaper from 1857 to date.

  The Times (London) Index (1785-   Ref AI 21 T46
  The QEII Library has the newspaper from 1785 to date.

- The Library also has a number of newspapers (national, regional, and local). Most of these do not have indexes, but you could scan them for the time period that you are researching. Ask at the Research Help Desk for help in identifying these newspapers.

3. Subject guides to the Internet are excellent sources of primary documents. Look for words such as *primary*, *archival*, *narrative*, etc. in the descriptions of each web site. These words are usually an indication that you have found a primary source.

  "History Digital Library" at Academic Info:
  http://www.academicinfo.net/histaalibrary.html

  "History" at the Librarians' Index to the Internet. Note especially the category "Primary Sources," but primary documents can also be found in

other categories.
http://lii.org/search/file/history

"History" at the Internet Public Library. Note especially the category "Historical Documents & Sources," but primary documents can also be found in the other categories.
http://www.ipl.org/div/subject/browse/hum30.00.00/

January 22, 2004