**What is a Primary Source?**

**A primary source** is generally a document that was created in the time period that you are studying, or by a person who lived during that time period and wrote about it later, and contains firsthand knowledge about the event, time period, or person that you are researching.

**A secondary source,** on the other hand, makes use of primary sources in the explanation or exploration of a prior time period and is distanced from this time period and uses primary sources as evidence to back up assertions.

Definitions (courtesy of Wayne Artis, Professor of History, PPCC):

**Primary:** Materials produced by people or groups directly involved in the event or topic under consideration, as either participants or witnesses.

**Secondary:** Texts—such as books, articles, or documentary films that people who were not eyewitnesses to the event or period in question write or create.

**Tertiary:** Texts such as encyclopedias, dictionaries, or textbooks that summarize and synthesize secondary sources.

Examples (courtesy of library.ithaca.edu):

Important note: Better safe than sorry.

If you're not sure whether a specific source is primary or secondary for the purposes of your assignment, **ask your instructor**. There are many gray areas because a source may be classified as secondary or primary depending on your purpose for it. Your instructor's interpretation may not entirely match the information in this guide or your tutor’s best guess. Ask before you spend hours of time on a project only to be disappointed.

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| Typically Primary Sources | Typically Secondary Sources |
| Government and legal documents, speeches, police reports, diaries and memoirs, eyewitness accounts, statistical, economic, and demographic data, pieces of creative writing such as poetry and fiction, photographs, audio and video recordings, art objects, interviews, surveys, fieldwork, empirical studies, Internet communications such as email, blogs, and social media. | Articles in newspapers or popular magazines, most non-fiction books (although many books contain primary sources such as letters and speeches), book or movie reviews, articles found in scholarly journals that discuss or evaluate someone else's original research, most documentaries |

The following sources were consulted in developing this guide. For more information, visit:

<https://libguides.ppcc.edu/History>

<https://library.ithaca.edu/sp/subjects/primary>

<http://guides.lib.umich.edu/c.php?g=305266&p=2088767>