



DePaul University Libraries

WHAT ARE PRIMARY SOURCES?*

Primary sources enable the researcher to get as close as possible to what actually happened during an historical event or time period. A primary source reflects the individual viewpoint of a participant or observer.

Undergraduate students are sometimes allowed to use a broader definition of primary sources, which may include some of the types of materials listed below. If in doubt, ask your instructor.

- **Diaries, journals, speeches, interviews, letters, memos, manuscripts and other papers** where individuals describe events they observed or in which they participated.
- **Memoirs and autobiographies.** These may be less reliable than diaries or letters since they are usually written long after events occurred and may be distorted by bias, dimming memory or the revised perspective that may come with hindsight.
- **Records of or information collected by government agencies.** Many kinds of records (e.g., birth, death, marriage, permits and licenses issued; census data, etc.) document conditions in a society at a particular time.
- **Records of organizations.** Meeting minutes, reports, correspondence, etc. reflect the activity and thinking of organizations or agencies
- **Published material.** Books, magazines, journal & newspaper articles written at the time of an event. While these are sometimes the eyewitness accounts by participants, in most cases they are written by journalists or third party observers. The important distinction to make is between materials written at the time of the event as a kind of report versus material written much later as historical analysis.
- **Photographs, audio recordings, moving pictures or video** documenting what happened
- **Materials that document the attitudes and popular thought of a historical time period.** If you are attempting to find evidence showing the mind set or psychology of a time or of a group (i.e., evidence of a world view, a set of attitudes or popular understanding of an event or condition), the most obvious source is **public opinion polls** taken at the time. Since these are generally very limited in availability and in what they reveal, however, it is also possible to make use of ideas and images conveyed in the mass media and **even literature, film, popular fiction textbooks**, etc. Again, the point is to use these sources written or produced at the time as evidence of how people were thinking.
- **Research data** such as anthropological field notes, the results of scientific experiments and other scholarly activity of the time.
- **Artifacts of all kinds:** physical objects, buildings, furniture, tools, appliances and household items, clothing, toys, etc.

BOOKS. Some compilations of reprinted primary source materials are available in the reference collection and periodicals section:

- *Documents of American History* (1492 – 1987) R.973 C735d10 Loop, LPC
- *Historic Documents* (1972 – 2002) R917.303 H6732 Loop, LPC
- *Vital Speeches* (1930s – present) Per.808.05 V83 Loop, LPC
- *Gallup Poll* (1970 – present) Per. 301.05 G175a LPC

Use the library catalog to find primary sources on a subject. It helps to determine first the official **Library of Congress Subject Heading (LCSH)**. Headings are not necessarily commonly-used terminology. For example, the LCSH for the Vietnam War is NOT "Vietnam War" but rather "Vietnamese Conflict, 1961-1975". Once you have identified the appropriate heading, narrow your search by adding a primary source subheading:

- Correspondence
- Diaries
- Interviews
- Pamphlets
- Personal narratives
- Sources

Notice the location of some material is indicated as being in Special Collection in the Lincoln Park Library. This vast collection of primary material covers topics as local as the Lincoln Park neighborhood and the history of DePaul University itself, as distant in time as rare books dating from the 16th century.

ARTICLES. To find citations to individual articles, use a newspaper or periodical index that covers the time period of interest. After you use the index, search the library catalog to determine whether the cited magazine or newspaper is available at DePaul.

Newspaper indexes:

- *Chicago Tribune Index* (1972 – present) Loop, LPC
- *New York Times Index* (1851 – present) Loop, LPC, or www.nyt.com

Periodical Indexes

- *International Index to Periodicals* (1920 – 1965) Loop, LPC
- *JSTOR* (1900 – present) database via www.lib.depaul.edu
- *Poole's Index to Periodical Literature* (1802 – 1906) LPC
- *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature* (1900 – present) Loop, LPC
- *Social Sciences & Humanities Index* (1965 – present) Loop, LPC

MICROFILM. DePaul Libraries maintain a microfilm collection of primary sources including compilations of letters, manuscripts, older periodicals and other documents on specific topics. High quality, laser printouts can be made free of charge.

INTERNET. Many digital library and museum collections contain excellent primary sources such as photographs, post cards and scanned images of letters. Two examples are

- DePaul Libraries Digital Collections www.lib.depaul.edu/digitalcollections.htm
 - Chicago Historical Society www.chicagohs.org/projects.html.
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