



Primary Sources

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Primary sources are the raw material of the research process. They are records of events as they first occurred or described, without interpretation or commentary. Primary sources may include letters, interviews, manuscripts, diaries, journals, newspapers, speeches, surveys, memoirs, documents produced by government agencies such as Congress or the courts, photographs, audio recordings, moving pictures or video recordings, untabulated research data, and objects or artifacts such as works of art or ancient maps.

SEE ALSO:

[Evaluating Your Sources](#)

[Researching & Writing Papers](#)

RELATED WEBSITE:

[Using Primary Sources on the Web](#)

Secondary sources are based on primary sources. Scholars use primary material to help generate historical interpretations, that is, a secondary source. Secondary sources often describe, interpret or explain primary sources, providing an analysis of the primary sources. Some secondary sources not only interpret the primary source, but will use it to argue a point of view. Examples of secondary sources include books, textbooks, and articles, encyclopedias that interpret or review primary sources.

For example, if you were researching Adenauer's role in rebuilding West Germany, Adenauer's own writings would be one of many primary sources available on this topic. Other primary sources might include relevant government documents and contemporary German newspaper articles. Books, encyclopedia articles, and scholarly journal articles about Adenauer's role are considered secondary sources.

Examples of primary and secondary sources:

	PRIMARY	SECONDARY
Biology	Experimental data	Lab report interpreting the data
History	Diary	Book about the diarist
	President's letters	Biography about the President
Art	Original drawing	Critique of the drawing

Citing Primary Sources

It is important to provide complete information about your primary source whether you found it in a print or online. The bibliographic elements to include in a citation for a published print source are:

- author of the document
- title of the document
- title of the book if different from the document
- name of editor or author of the book
- place of publication
- publisher
- publication year
- page numbers.

The basic elements to include in a citation for an online source are:

- author of the document
- title of the document
- title of the web site
- author or producer of the web site
- website URL
- date (if given)
- date accessed

How to I find a primary source?

When doing historical research in [America: History and Life](#) or [Historical Abstracts](#), you can use the subject terms "Diaries" and "Letters" to help locate the text of such original documents. Narrow your search with terms appropriate to your research. Other indexes and databases may use different terms for these types of primary source material. Consult the list of subject terms provided by the database or look closely at a similar type of record in the database to see what subject terms have been used.

The screenshot shows the ABC-CLIO America: History & Life database search interface. The search results for 'civil rights movement' and 'letters' are displayed. The search results are limited to 'Articles' and 'Book Reviews'. The search results are displayed in 'any' language. The search results are displayed in 'any' language. The search results are displayed in 'any' language.

Search Results:

- Search:** United States & Canadian history
- Search:** Search Reset
- for:** civil rights movement in **Keywords**
- for:** letters in **Subject Terms**
- limit to:** Articles Book Reviews Media Reviews Collections Dissertations
- in:** any language

Search Results:

- Add / Remove Search Fields [view]**
- Search History [view]**
- Display Options [view]**
- Personal Profile [view]**

Search Results:

- Type:** Article
- Author:** Miller, Char, ed.
- Title:** THE MISSISSIPPI SUMMER PROJECT REMEMBERED - THE STEPHEN MITCHELL BINGHAM LETTER.
- Citation:** Journal of Mississippi History 1985 47(4): 284-307. ISSN: 0022-2771
- Abstract:** In the summer of 1964, some 600 young people served as **civil rights** workers in Mississippi, conducting freedom schools, working in community centers, or promoting voter registration. Stephen Mitchell Bingham, Yale-educated and from an upper-class family of activists, volunteered for the Mississippi Summer Project. Much influenced by the University of Mississippi's James W. Silver, who had published *Mississippi: The Closed Society* (1964), Bingham composed a circular letter to be disseminated among black and white policymakers. His "Mississippi Letter" provides cogent insights into the feelings and experiences of the **civil rights** workers, while providing a balanced description of the opposing forces at work in Mississippi. He believed a dialogue between the groups was a necessary prerequisite to solving the basic economic and political problems faced by Mississippi blacks.
- Documentation:** 5 notes.
- Abstracter:** M. S. Legan
- Language:** English
- Period:** 1964-65.
- Subject:**
 - (click a term to run a new search)
 - » Race Relations.
 - » Mississippi Summer Project.
 - » Letters.
 - » **Civil Rights Movement.**
 - » Blacks.
 - » Bingham, Stephen Mitchell.
- Entry:** 24A:2280

Rhodes College also subscribes to a number of databases that are rich in primary sources for History:

- [The American Civil War: Letters & Diaries](#)
- [Black Thought and Culture: African Americans from Colonial Times to the Present](#)
- [North American Women's Letters and Diaries: Colonial to 1950](#)
- [Primary Sources in U.S. History](#)
- [Women and Social Movements in the United States, 1600-2000](#)

The information below appears on the American Library Association's Instruction & Research Services Committee of the Reference and User Service Association History Section webpage, [Using Primary Sources on the Web](#):

The following reputable sites link to thousands of primary sources.

- [American Memory](#): Historical Collections for the National Digital Library
- [Avalon Project](#): Documents in Law, History and Diplomacy
- [EuroDocs](#): Western European Primary Historical Documents
- [Making of America](#): 19th Century Books and Magazines

Subject directories are useful when you are interested in seeing a broad variety of sources on your topic. Below is an example of a subject directory which includes annotations and evaluations of sites.

- [World Wide Virtual Library: History](#)

Many libraries compile lists of recommended history sites. An example includes:

- [History on the Web](#) (University of Washington)

Evaluating Primary Source Web Sites

Before relying on the information provided by a website, examine and understand the purpose of the website. While the purpose might not affect the accuracy of the primary source material it contains, it might indicate that the material has been altered or manipulated in some way to change or influence its meaning. Sometimes sites use primary source material to persuade the reader to a particular point of view, distorting the contents in obvious or subtle ways. Also, sites can use primary source material haphazardly, without appropriately choosing, inspecting, or citing the work.