

Primary sources are primarily used in historical research, but you may see these types of sources being used across all majors. In this video, you will learn what a primary source is, why you might use them, how you might find primary sources at the University of Delaware and beyond, and some tips for locating them.

Primary sources are documents, accounts or testimonies produced during a certain time period. They capture the thoughts, feelings, reactions and context of a particular event or historical period.

Primary Sources might include:

Diaries

Memoirs

Interviews

Audio recordings or music

Photographs

Digital content

Government documents or political cartoons

These types of primary sources are typically used in historical research, but primary sources exist in all fields of study. For example, digital content, like social media posts, would be considered a primary source for researchers in political science, journalism, or sociology. Interviews can be used by journalists, psychologists, or criminologists. The sciences and the social sciences will often look for primary sources through empirical studies, specifically looking for the original research, data, or experiments.

For example, a newspaper article published yesterday about the status of COVID-19 vaccinations would not be considered a primary source because it is providing current information on the state of the pandemic. It would be considered a secondary source because it is an analysis of an event that took place. However, the same newspaper article would be considered a primary source 50 years from now if a student was researching vaccination rates in the U.S. You have to consider the publication date and context before deciding if you can use a source.

Regardless of what subject you are looking for primary sources in, these types of sources can act as a foundation for your argument and provide evidence. When you are analyzing a primary source, ask yourself these questions:

- Who created it?
- Why did the creator make or produce this?
- What does this primary source tell me about the time period or event?
- What part of the story or who is the primary source leaving out?

So now that we know what a primary source is, how do we find them? In order to locate primary sources, you must first identify the time period you are researching. For example, let's say that I am researching the beginning reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic in March of 2020. That means that I want to identify and find sources that were created in and around this time period. Finding historical sources is a different process than finding current primary sources.

Let's first talk about tips for locating historical sources.

When searching for historical primary sources, there are a few tips to keep in mind while you search:

Search broadly.

It can be hard to find a primary source that specifically describes what you are trying to show in your argument. Therefore, you need to search in broad themes and terms.

Use historical language from that time period

This can often be the hardest part of primary source research, but one of the most important. Terms, descriptions, and phrases change over time. For example, vaccinations had several different names throughout history - depending on what time period your research falls in, might mean that you have to change how you search for primary sources. If you are researching vaccinations during early colonial times in America, inoculations would be the word to use. Don't know historical terms? Take a look at your secondary sources to see how they are using words or look up your word in the dictionary.

The University of Delaware has a very large collection of databases that only have primary sources. These databases usually cover a specific theme. Having trouble finding a primary source collection? Visit the UD Primary Sources research guide for a list of primary source databases based on region.

Current primary sources are typically too current to be found in a library database. Using your preferred search engine is the best tool to find social media posts, interviews, news footage, or current reports. Here are some tips to keep in mind when trying to find current primary sources:

- Search broadly
- Use specific keywords for what type of source you are looking for like diary or interview
- Consult current news sources

It's important to note that primary sources can often be difficult to locate and identify because the material for the topic might not have been deemed worthwhile to collect and preserve or the source might be considered a secondary source. It can often help to talk to a librarian or an archivist if you are having trouble locating primary sources.