What is a primary source?

A primary source is a document or physical object, written or created during the time under study. These sources were present during an experience or time period and offer an inside view of a particular event. Some types of primary sources include:

- ORIGINAL DOCUMENTS: Diaries, speeches, manuscripts, letters, interviews, news film footage, autobiographies, official records, etc.
- CREATIVE WORKS: Poetry, drama, novels, music, art
- RELICS OR ARTIFACTS: Pottery, furniture, clothing, buildings

Examples of primary sources include:

- Anne Frank: Diary of a Young Girl
- The Constitution of the United States
- A journal article reporting NEW research or findings

How do you find primary sources?

Primary sources are found in a variety of places. Your best bet in identifying the primary sources that you need are from the research you do with your scholarly books and articles. You’ll find the sources listed in the bibliographies, and throughout your readings in your secondary research. Pay attention to what you are reading, and study the bibliographies carefully.

An example: you are studying the Battle of Shiloh during the American Civil War. You first look to the background sources, such as subject encyclopedias, or general books on the topic, in order to educate yourself on the facts of the battle. Look over the suggested readings or citations in the bibliography and chances are you will find reference to diaries, letters, or dispatches by the generals. These are primary sources that were used to write the background information, the secondary research that you are reading.

Once the primary sources are identified, then you just need to track them down. Please remember that you can ask for help in locating specific primary sources if you cannot figure out how to do that. Many primary sources are kept within books, transcribed and posted on the Web, published in contemporary newspapers, or are preserved in special collections in libraries.

Finding Primary Sources in Books (using the Library online catalog or Link+)

Search Albert or Link+ by keyword:

- For example, keyword search: Ulysses Grant
- Looking at a record of a biography of Grant, you’ll see a subject heading: Grant, Ulysses S. (Ulysses Simpson), 1822-1885. Click on it.
- In a broad subject heading like this you’ll find books written by Grant, and books about Grant
- Some of these are great primary sources
- You can also add words like: diaries, letters, documents, primary to your keyword search
Finding Primary Sources in Citation Lists

In the scholarly articles and other research, pay attention to the footnotes and bibliographies. If you see a likely primary source, you can search for it:

- In Albert or Link+ if it is a book title
- In the Journal List if it is a journal or newspaper article
- On the Web

You can request the journal or newspaper via Interlibrary Loan if it is not owned by SMC. Such requests usually take 3-4 business days to complete.

Finding Primary Sources on the Web

Search the Web, and put your exact document in quotations:

For example: “Gettysburg Address”

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