

What is a Primary Source? A How-To Guide for High School Students

Goal

The goal of this lesson plan is to teach high school students how to identify, analyze, and interpret primary sources such as textual documents, media, and oral histories. Teachers can use the lesson plan with primary sources of their choosing.

What is a Primary Source?

Examples of primary sources are original documents - diaries, speeches, manuscripts, letters, interviews, news film footage, autobiographies, and official records. Primary sources are also physical objects found in everyday life, museums, or archaeological sites. Princeton states primary sources are created “during an experience or time period and offer an inside view of a particular event.”¹ Secondary sources are current textbooks, histories, and encyclopedias, which are created by historians and authors observing the past.

Objectives of the Lesson Plan

- Students will distinguish between primary and secondary sources
- Students will acquire and apply investigative skills to locate and use sources
- Students will learn how information and experiences affect, are interpreted, and evolve from different frames of reference, people, and culture
- Students will articulate the implications of cultural diversity, as well as cohesion, within and across groups
- Students will collect, study, and use primary sources to compare, contrast, and articulate cultural diversity, events, and impact from the past to the present

The Purpose of Learning Primary Sources

- Understanding that reading and writing history is an interpretive act.
- Studying primary sources instead of secondary sources allows researchers to make their own opinions about a historical topic.

Types of Sources

I. Textual Documents

Comparing textual documents as primary or secondary can be confusing for the beginner. Remember that primary textual documents were written in the time period being studied. As an example, a book about the history of farming in the 1930s is a secondary source because the author analyzed multiple primary sources and drew an interpretation from those documents.

A primary source would be a book written in the 1930s educating the farmer about current farming practices, or a farmer’s diary entry in the 1930s about his failing crops.

¹ “Primary vs. Secondary Sources,” Princeton, accessed October 25, 2014, <http://www.princeton.edu/~refdesk/primary2.html>.

² Judith Moyer, “What is Oral History,” Step-by-step guide to Oral History, last modified

Textual documents can be handwritten or typed.

Questions for analysis:

1. When and under what circumstances was the document written?
2. Who is the author? What do we know about him or her?
3. Who is their audience?
4. What is their purpose in writing?
5. What is surprising in the document? What is missing in the document?

II. Media: images and videos

People record images and moments through photography and videography. Media can always be considered a primary source because these were created in time, unless a historian or artists compiles a media document with various historical media and places his/her own interpretation on it.

Question for analysis:

1. Who are the subjects in this video? What is their agenda/goal for participating?
2. What was the purpose of this motion picture or image? Is it informative, promotional, or propagandist?
3. Who are the people who appear in it? What is their role?
4. Do you think it was filmed on location, or was there a stage set? How does this affect the validity of the message?
5. Who do you think was the intended audience?
6. What feelings or ideas do you think its creators wanted to communicate?

III. Oral Histories

Oral histories are “the systematic collection of living people’s testimony about their own experiences.” Oral histories are not “folklore, gossip, hearsay, or rumor.”² Oral histories are created in several formats: audio recordings, video or film, and are sometimes turned into written transcripts. A professional historian or professional interviewer performs many steps to capture an oral history:

1. Formulating a central question or issue.
2. Planning the project by considering: end products, budget, publicity, evaluation, personnel, equipment, and time frames.
3. Conducting background research and collects proper documents and forms for release of oral history.
4. Interviewing the person. The interviewer can supply the interviewee with a set of questions to help guide the interview and prevent rambling or off topic narratives.
5. Processing interviews.
6. Evaluating research and interviews and cycle back to step 1 or go on to step 7.
7. Organizing and presenting results.

² Judith Moyer, “What is Oral History,” Step-by-step guide to Oral History, last modified 1999, date accessed October 25, 2014, http://dohistory.org/on_your_own/toolkit/oralHistory.html.

8. Archiving the material.

Historians value oral histories because the information is derived from a person who witnessed or was involved in a historical event. These are often recorded after the historical event occurred, but they are still considered primary sources. Oral history subjects are typically not professional historians; therefore, their views on a historical event might be different than a historian studying the event. The interviewee's scope on an event will most likely be narrow.

Oral histories can be emotionally striking because you can view a person's opinions and see the emotion behind those opinions. Therefore we must ask ourselves a series of basic questions as we watch, listen, or read the oral histories:

- Why was it important for that person to record their story?
- Who is this person, and are they an authority on the subject?
- When was the oral history recorded? How displaced is it from the historical event?

Questions for analysis:

1. What format is used for the oral history you are examining now? (An audio recording, video or film, or a written transcript) What is the significance of this format?
2. Does this seem like an interview or a conversation? Significance?
3. What is the purpose of this oral history? What information was the historian trying to capture?
4. What can you tell about the person telling the story? What is the person's point of view?
5. What is the significance of this oral history? Is it personal or historical?
6. How does encountering this story firsthand change its emotional impact?
7. What can you learn from this oral history? Do you think it is reflective of other people's opinions on the agricultural subject?

The analysis questions for this lesson plan were adopted from the Library of Congress – "Teacher's Guides and Analysis Tools." Visit the website for more information about various primary sources and how to analyze them.

<http://www.loc.gov/teachers/usingprimarysources/guides.html>