Finding primary sources

Overview

- What are primary sources?
- Start with secondary sources.
- Using library catalogs to find primary sources.
- Using newspaper and periodical indexes to find primary sources.
- Finding primary sources on the Internet.
- Evaluating the quality of sources.

What are primary sources?

Primary sources are the materials produced by people who witnessed or participated in historical events, or lived in specific historical periods. They are the historian’s raw data. Some examples of primary sources are:

- Diaries, journals or autobiographies
- Letters and correspondence
- Books, magazines and newspapers produced at the time of the event
- Photographs or paintings
- Novels, poetry or plays

Begin with secondary sources

Specialized reference sources, like encyclopedias, can help you identify key historical events related to your topic. Many of them include also note key primary and secondary sources.

Companion encyclopedia of geography : the environment and humankind
Encyclopedia of global change : environmental change and human society

Use the OSU library catalog to find these and similar sources in the Valley library collection. Choose a keyword search. Include terms “encyclopedia,” “dictionary” or “guide” to find reference materials.

You can also limit your search by choosing “Reference” from the “Location” menu on the keyword search screen. Be aware that some specialized encyclopedias and dictionaries are shelved in the regular stacks and will not show up if you limit the search to Reference.

TIP

Scholars use bibliographies, works cited lists and footnotes so that others can follow in their footsteps. A quality secondary source will let you know where to look for the primary sources on which it is based.

Use these resources to identify key primary sources on your topic. Examining these primary sources will help you:

- Critically evaluate your secondary sources.
- Figure out what your own point of view, or thesis, about your topic is.
Using library catalogs to find primary sources

BY AUTHOR OR TITLE

Use author or title searches to find specific items. Search for primary documents just as you would secondary documents.

You can also use the author search to find items by a particular person or organization. Enter the person's name (last name first) or organization name in the author field.

Examples:  
Muir, John

BY SUBJECT

You can use the same subject headings you find in your search for secondary sources to help you find primary sources. Once you have identified some useful subject headings for your topic, add one of the following subheadings to look for primary source documents:

correspondence

TIP

You can do a keyword search of subject headings by:
• Choosing “keyword” from the main catalog page
• Typing an “s:” in front of your search. This tells the computer to limit the search to subject headings

Example:  s: conservation AND sources

diaries

interviews

pamphlets

periodicals

personal narratives

sources

The OSU library catalog, Orbis-Cascade catalog and WorldCat all use Library of Congress subject headings. Main headings are followed by subheadings. Follow this format:

Environmental Policy United States History
Conservation of natural resources -- United States -- History.
Conservation of natural resources -- United States -- History -- Sources.
Ecology -- United States -- History -- Sources.

Using subject headings to find primary sources can be tricky. Don't hesitate to ask a reference librarian for help.

COMPILATIONS OF REPUBLISHED PRIMARY SOURCES

Important primary source documents are frequently republished in books. Look for books with phrases like “a documentary history” in the title.
Add the keywords “document*” or “sources” to your search. Or add the subheading “sources” to your Library of Congress subject heading.

Collections can be limited to documents from a particular event, geographical area, subject or time period. Examples of compilations in the Valley Library collection include:

- *A documentary history of conservation in America*
- *Land and water [compiled by] Frank E. Smith*

**Using periodicals and newspapers from the time period**

Use periodical indexes to find articles written in the time period related to your subject. Relevant periodical indexes at the Valley Library include:

- *Index to the Times (London) (1957-present)*
- *International Index to Periodicals (1920-1955)*
- *New York Times Index (1851-present)*
- *Nineteenth Century Reader’s Guide (1890-1922)*

Ask a reference librarian for help using these, or other, tools to find contemporary accounts of historical events.

**Using the Internet to find primary sources**

The Internet is quickly becoming a rich source of historical documents on a variety of topics. More and more, libraries and archives are digitizing collections and making them available to people around the world. Resources available include photographs, scanned letters and journals, and the full-text of books and journals.

To find documents:

1. The most common strategy is to use a search engine such as Google (www.google.com) or AltaVista (www.altavista.com) to search the Internet.

2. Remember that search engines only allow keyword searching. Be creative in choosing your keywords.
   - Brainstorm synonyms for your terms.
   - Use the advanced search options that are available, and browse the help screens for your search engine to find out how to refine your search.
   - Include terms like “documents,” “diaries” or “journals” that indicate the type of source you are trying to find.
3. Here are 2 examples of quality Internet sources for historical documents.

The Historical Text Archive
http://historicaltextarchive.com/

The American Memory Project
http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/index.html

4. Make sure you consider the factors on the Evaluating Internet Resources handout before using anything you find on the Internet for your paper.

TIP
This just scratches the surface – you can find more resources on the History subject research guide (available at: http://osullibrary.oregonstate.edu/research/srg/hist.htm) as well as links to tutorials on finding primary sources.