

Teacher's Definitions: Primary and Secondary Source¹

Primary sources are materials that provide direct or first-hand evidence about an event, person, object, or work of art. Usually, primary sources are created during the time in question. Examples: letters, diary entries, news films, photographs, poetry, fiction, music, pottery, clothing, and buildings.

- Can you think of an example of a **primary** source?

There are a variety of examples that students may mention. Teachers may provide a timeframe, event, or people to help students apply their understanding of primary and secondary sources to what they have recently studied:

- Recording of and letters by various Civil Rights leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
- Student's own writings—e.g., journal entries, poems, text messages, emails, etc.
- Song lyrics, artworks, and novels
- Personal items—e.g., Madame Curie's lab notebook, George Washington's glasses

Secondary sources are at least one step removed from the event or phenomenon being studied; they interpret, assign value to, conjecture about, and draw conclusions about the events reported or thoughts expressed in primary sources. Many secondary sources are published works such as textbooks, histories, magazine articles and reviews, encyclopedias, etc., but can also take the form of radio or TV documentaries, for example.

- Can you think of an example that is a **secondary** source?

Students may the following examples:

- Student's written biography of Harriet Tubman, report on another country, etc.
- Online Wikipedia
- Textbooks on art history, American Civil War, etc.
- A map showing the relocation of Native Americans after specific treaties
- An article about NASA's Mars rover, Curiosity.

¹ Adapted from <http://www.loc.gov/teachers/usingprimarysources/>