

Primary Sources in the Humanities

Primary sources are the original materials or evidence to be analyzed, evaluated, contextualized, or synthesized in the research process.

In the Humanities and Social Sciences

Primary sources in the humanities are usually from the time period under study and offer first-hand accounts or direct evidence.

In the social sciences, primary sources can also include reports on surveys, ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, or participant observation.

Classic Examples

- Historical newspapers
- Documentary photographs or videos
- Corporate or organizational records
- Works of art, literature, or music
- Eyewitness accounts or testimony
- Interviews
- Diaries, journals, or letters
- Statutes, laws, or regulations
- Speeches, legal decisions, or case law
- Archaeological or historical artifacts
- Survey research

Identification in Context

Sources that are secondary or tertiary in one context might be primary sources in another.

For instance, if your research design called for a content analysis of the coverage of gender roles in high school health textbooks, then these textbooks would be your primary, rather than tertiary, sources.

Likewise, if your research question was “How did 19th century newspapers in the American Northeast address the publication of Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*?” then book reviews from that era might be one type of primary source you would want to consult, rather than a secondary source.

Where can I find primary sources?

General purpose databases (*Academic Search Complete*, *ProQuest Research Library*, *JSTOR*) and specialized or discipline-specific databases (*SAGE Historical Documents*, *Early English Books Online*, *Early American Imprints*) include primary sources. They also can be found at the Library of Congress and the Mason Libraries Special Collections Department.