

Primary and Secondary Sources

When historians study a topic, they try to gather a wide variety of sources during their research. Historians use sources like a lawyer uses evidence. Both need information to “make their case.” But not all sources are the same. Historians classify their sources in two categories: primary and secondary.

Secondary Sources

Secondary sources are usually published books or articles by an author who makes a personal interpretation about a topic based on primary sources. The writer is not an eyewitness, or a participant in, the historical event. Most books, encyclopedias, and websites are secondary sources. Secondary sources are useful because they provide important background information about your topic. The footnotes and bibliographies of secondary sources will also lead you to primary sources.

Examples of Secondary Sources:

Biographies	History textbooks	Books about the topic	Articles about the topic
Encyclopedias	Media documentaries	Interviews with scholars/experts	Websites

Primary Sources

Primary sources are materials directly related to a topic by time or participation. They provide a first-hand account about a person or an event because they were written or produced in the time period you are studying, are eyewitness accounts of historic events, are documents published at the time of specific historic events, or are later recollections by participants in historic events.

Examples of Primary Sources:

Historic objects	Government records	Photographs	Manuscript collections
Newspapers from the era	Music of the era	Interviews with participants	Letters
Original film footage	Autobiographies		

Could it be both primary and secondary?

It all depends on how you use it. For your History Day bibliography, you are going to have to think of how you used the source and then categorize it as either primary or secondary. Each source should only appear in your bibliography once. If it could be confusing to your judge, use your annotation to explain why you categorized a source as either primary or secondary. For example, websites are usually secondary sources; however, let’s say you found a website written by the participant in an event where they discuss their experiences. This source should be categorized as primary – since the author was directly involved in the event – and you should use your annotation to explain this.

Citing a Collection of Materials

When you are citing a collection of materials, such as several photographs from the same online archive, you can cite these materials as a collection. Rather than create citation for each of these, cite the collection of images. You can then use your annotation to better explain the quantity of images that you found in this source and how extensively you used it.

FIGURE 1. COMPARISON OF ORIGINAL PRIMARY SOURCE WITH SECONDARY SOURCE EXCERPT

Abigail Adams wrote a letter to her husband, John, in 1776. Below are an excerpt of the letter included in a textbook and a copy of the original document accessed on the internet. The excerpt within the textbook is a secondary source because it represents only part of the letter and thus does not provide full context. The original is a primary source. Citations are provided for both as well as for the actual document.



SECONDARY SOURCE – TEXTBOOK:

Adams, Abigail. Abigail Adams to John Adams, March 31-April 5, 1776. In *The American Pageant: A History of the American People*, by David M. Kennedy, Lizabeth Cohen, and Thomas Bailey (Boston: Wadsworth, 2010), 153.



PRIMARY SOURCE – WEBSITE (AS SHOWN HERE):

Adams, Abigail. Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 31 March – 5 April 1776. Adams Family Papers: An Electronic Archive. Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, MA. Accessed January 18, 2020. <https://www.masshist.org/digitaladams/archive/doc?id=L17760331aa>.

PRIMARY SOURCE – ORIGINAL MANUSCRIPT:

Adams, Abigail. Letter from Abigail Adams to John Adams, 31 March – 5 April 1776. Adams Family Papers. Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston, MA.

Collection of the Massachusetts Historical Society.

Bibliographic citation format: *Chicago Manual of Style*, 17th ed.

NOTE:

The bibliographic citations shown here are appropriate for the use of only this letter from Abigail Adams. If several documents from the Adams Family Papers are used, it is proper to combine the sources into a single citation as addressed in Rule 19 (p. 19).