

Primary Sources: Getting it “Straight from the Horse’s Mouth”

PRIMARY SOURCES...

...are often considered:

authoritative, accurate, direct, and closest (in time and proximity) to the event being studied.

...need to be evaluated rhetorically, like any source.

(Who is it? What are their qualifications? What is their political affiliation? Where do they stand on the topic? When was it created—is it timely based on the event being investigated? Is it firsthand information, or as close to it as possible?)

...vary in genre, depending on the subject of interest. There is no “neat” formula for primary source-work. Primary sources include letters, memoirs, first-person accounts, diaries, oral histories, newspapers, government reports, statistical reports, maps, photographs, legislative material, court records, and more.

If you are interested in learning about:

You might look at:

a novelist who wrote about New Orleans	his novels, letters, stories, interviews
the engineering of New Orleans levees	ARMY Corps of Engineers report, government reports, firsthand accounts of levee construction from New Orleans newspapers
effects of the oil spill on wildlife in Louisiana	results of scientific experiments, observations by scientists, documents from involved environmentalist groups
the effectiveness of post-Katrina tourism businesses	marketing information from the businesses, phone interviews with tour companies

...can be developed on our own!

By conducting our own interviews, surveys, or observations, you are *doing primary research*. Your primary research must be well-thought-out. Good decisions about who is best to interview, as well as how you should design and conduct surveys, are very important so that you generate *objective, reliable, credible results*. It’s also important to note that you can’t always go straight to the “horse’s mouth,” so you may have to get close to it for primary information. (You might not be able to interview the President of the United States, but you might be able to read one of his speeches, look at the White House archives, or actually contact a lower-ranking government official who you can interview about the President’s policies.)

...involve networking. Who do you know? Who do you know that *knows* someone else?

Related resources

Also from The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Library—a tutorial on secondary research: http://www.library.illinois.edu/hpnl/docs/videos/secondary_sources/secondary_sources.html

David Blakesley & Jeffrey Hoogeveen, *Writing: A Manual for the Digital Age* Wadsworth 2008 (152-155)

Dana Lynn Driscoll, Allen Brizee, The Purdue University Online Writing Lab tutorial “What is Primary Research and How do I get Started?” (2010): <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/559/01/>

Thanks to:

Bruce Ballenger, *The Curious Researcher*, Pearson 2007 (67)

Mary Stuart, The University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Library tutorial on “Primary Sources” (2009) http://www.library.illinois.edu/hpnl/docs/videos/primary_sources/primary_sources.html