

Primary Sources for History

Do you need primary sources for a history essay, and are not sure just what they are or where to find them?

What are primary sources

Primary sources are records or objects that were created by participants or observers of an event.

They include items such as diaries, letters, manuscripts, and newspaper accounts. They also include maps, speeches, photos, and videos.

These items are the raw materials that historians use to analyze the past. Secondary sources are created by historians who describe, analyze or interpret primary sources.

Where primary sources are located

Where are primary sources located?

Sometimes a single copy of a primary source may only exist in a personal collection.

Other times, large collections of primary sources exist in university or national archives. If you wanted, for example, to view primary sources related to the development of the Avro Arrow, you would need to consult the print documents held at Library and Archives Canada in Ottawa.

But luckily many sources are reproduced in print or digital format.

How to search for primary sources

The Library owns many books that are collections of primary sources.

You can find these books by searching for your subject in combination with one of the following terms:

- Sources
- Documents
- Interviews
- Personal narratives
- Statistics
- Diaries
- Correspondence
- Biography
- Archives

For example, a search for the “Vietnam War” and “personal narratives”, and limited to just “books,” retrieves many primary source texts.

The library also owns digitized collections of primary sources.

Our digitized news stories can be found in the section on new articles. You can search for your topic in newspapers such as:

- The Globe and Mail
- The Illustrated London News
- The New York Times
- The Times (London) and
- The Toronto Star

These articles go back as far as the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

In addition, databases of themed collections can be found in the History subject guide. Choose the primary sources link. “Black Thought and Culture,” and “British and Irish Women’s Letters and Diaries” are just some of the many databases that contain a treasure trove of primary sources.

Many archives, libraries, and other organizations are digitizing their archival collections and making them freely available on the internet and findable through Google. See, for example, The Internet Archive.

Laurier Archives

Laurier has its own archives, located on the first floor of the Waterloo-campus library. The Archives can be found under “research.” So, if you are looking for the history of Kitchener-Waterloo, you will find many documents and artifacts by visiting the archives.

If you have any questions, just ask us at library.wlu.ca/help/askus.