

Analyze Primary and Secondary Sources

Primary sources are firsthand accounts of events. By contrast, secondary sources are secondhand accounts of events. Both primary and secondary sources are useful, but you need to understand the difference between the two.

1 Determine who created the source as well as when and why it was created. Determine whether it is a primary or secondary source.

Identify the author of the document. Next, look for the date the document was written or the date when the document was first published. Most primary sources are written close to the date of the events described. Secondary sources are often written well after the events described. Firsthand observers or participants in an event create primary sources. People who did not witness an event create secondary sources. Primary sources record an event. Secondary sources analyze or draw conclusions about events. Secondary sources rely on both primary and secondary sources.

2 Identify the main idea and supporting details, and determine whether they are facts or opinions.

Read the text carefully and ask yourself, “What point is this text making?” This point is the main idea. Then reread the text and list details that support this main idea. Decide whether these details are facts or opinions. If the details are facts, it should be possible to confirm them in other sources. If the author uses emotional language that shows feelings, the supporting details are probably opinions.

3 Decide whether the source’s information is biased or if it is accurate and credible.

Check statements in the text against reliable sources, such as encyclopedias or books written by experts on the topic. If reliable sources agree with the text, it is probably fairly accurate. If most of the text seems to be opinions rather than facts, it is not an accurate source of information. Still, these opinions can teach you about the author’s world. A writer who observed an exciting or scary event may use emotional language to describe the event, but the source may still be a reliable account.