Using Primary & Secondary Sources – English Transcript

Do you have an assignment that calls for using primary or secondary sources? Do you need some help figuring out which is which? This tutorial will help you understand the difference between primary and secondary sources. You'll learn about their traits, see some examples of each, and learn when to use each of them.

Primary sources are firsthand accounts, such as letters, diaries, speeches, or interviews. They are original documents created by people who directly witnessed what they're describing, people who were there. Let's look at some primary source examples.

For social studies, you may find a newspaper article written during the Revolutionary War, a transcript of a speech given by George Washington, excerpts from the journals of Lewis and Clark, or newsreel video footage of World War II. For art, you may find a willow basket by an Apache Indian artist, Mary Cassatt's painting, Little Girl In Blue Armchair, or Wassily Kandinsky's painting, Circles In a Circle. As for science, you may find statistics about the decline in the population of bees or a drawing from the Wright brothers' patent for their flying machine.

So when should you use primary sources? Use primary sources when you want to get a sense of what it was like to experience something in person. For example, you may want to read an eyewitness account, view photographs, or watch a video. You may want to interpret data for yourself or personally reflect on works of art and literature.

In contrast, secondary sources interpret or analyze primary sources. They are not created by those who have directly witnessed what they are describing. Instead, the authors of secondary sources are often experts in their field who build upon information from primary sources by summarizing, discussing, commenting on, evaluating, reviewing, drawing conclusions, and so on.

Let's look at some secondary source examples. For social studies, you may find a book discussing the Revolutionary War from both the American and the British perspectives, an article analyzing President George Washington's speaking style , a biography about York's contribution to the Lewis and Clark expedition, or a documentary recounting one of the final events of World War II.

As for art, you may find an article about Native American basket weaving techniques, a book about Mary Cassatt's life and paintings, or a lecture given about Kandinsky's painting style. And for science, you may find a newspaper article about how to help the declining bee population or a book about how the Wright brothers invented the airplane.

So when should you use secondary sources? A common use is for gathering information about a subject, helping you build background knowledge. Use secondary sources when you want to see what others who have studied or investigated a topic or event have learned about it. Or you may want to read an expert's analysis of an issue or interpretation of a work of art or literature.

OK. Now it's your turn to try. For a topic about themes in Mo Willems' books, which of these two examples is a primary source, and which is a secondary source?

The primary source is the book, Waiting Is Not Easy!, written by Mo Willems. This book is where you can discover one of Mo Willems themes for yourself. The secondary source is the biography about Mo Willems, which may explain how his childhood influenced the themes in his books.

Which of these two is a primary source for a paper about Oregon salmon populations? Which is a secondary source?

The primary source is the raw data collected by the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife showing Oregon salmon counts. It's important to remember that in order for data to count as a primary source, it must be unanalyzed and in numeric form only. The example of a secondary source is the article that discusses the work being done to increase the number and diversity of salmon.

Now try this last example. Which is a primary source, and which is a secondary source for a paper about life for children on the Oregon Trail?

The primary source is the covered wagon that you can see in person at a local history museum. The secondary source is a web site describing what it was like to travel by wagon on the Oregon Trail.

Good thinking. Now you should better understand the difference between primary and secondary sources.

For specific examples and for more information about this topic and the entire research process, explore OSLIS. Thank you to the Oregon CLIP Project for allowing the OSLIS Committee to adapt their tutorials. OSLIS -- Learn to Research. Research to Learn.