



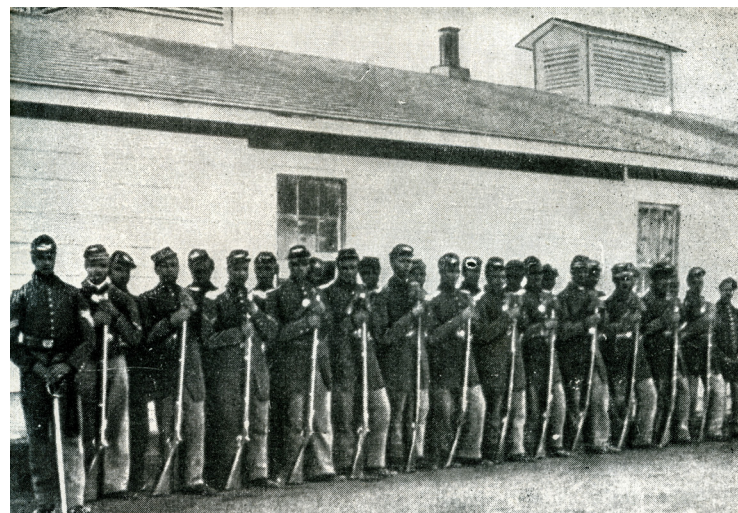
Spotlight on Primary and Secondary Sources

Historians use a variety of sources when conducting research. Sources can be categorized as **primary** or **secondary**.

Primary sources are those created by people who witnessed an event. They are often created at the time an event occurred. Primary sources are considered to be the most reliable sources because they include direct evidence about the subject. Diaries, photographs, and transcripts from speeches are examples of primary sources.

Secondary sources are created by people who have studied primary sources. Creators of secondary sources often describe, analyze, summarize, or interpret primary sources. These sources can be created close to the time of an event or many years later. Textbooks, newspaper editorials, and biographies are examples of secondary sources.

Historians use a combination of primary and secondary sources to draw conclusions when conducting research and writing about historical events. Some sources can be either primary or secondary sources depending on the research question. Consider an interview with a person who lived in Charleston, South Carolina, at the beginning of the Civil War but did not witness any battles. The interviewee includes details relayed to her secondhand about the Battle of Fort Sumter. It also includes details about how she felt in the days following the first battle. If the research question is about what happened at Fort Sumter on April 12, 1861, then the interview would be considered a secondary source. If the research question is about how people in Charleston responded to the Battle of Fort Sumter, then the interview would be considered a primary source.



This photograph of African-American soldiers assigned to Company E, 4th United States Colored Infantry is an example of a primary source.

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Spotlight on Primary and Secondary Sources

Explain to students that they will use sources to conduct their own research for school projects and topics they find interesting, just like historians use sources to conduct research. Review the definitions of primary and secondary sources.

Emphasize that primary sources are created by people who witnessed an event. Secondary sources are created after an event has occurred by people who have analyzed primary sources. Explain that primary sources are considered to be more reliable than secondary sources because they are based on firsthand experiences. The reliability of secondary sources depends on the credibility of the author or creator.

Ask What are some examples of primary sources? (sample answers: photographs, recordings or transcripts of speeches, autobiographies)

Ask What are some examples of secondary sources? (sample answers: a painting of an event by an artist who did not witness the event, encyclopedias, artistic criticism)

Ask Imagine that you are writing a paper about the Declaration of Independence. What is the first primary source you should consult? (sample answer: the text of the Declaration of Independence)

Ask What is a secondary source you could consult to conduct research about the Declaration of Independence? (sample answer: an encyclopedia)

Explain that categorization of sources is not always exact. Some documents and sources might contain a mix of primary and secondary sources. For example, a textbook might contain the text of legislation. The description of the legislation is considered a secondary source. The text of the legislation is a primary source. Explain to students that a single source can be either primary or secondary, depending on the research question. Go over the example in their text, and ask for other examples of how a single source could be both a primary and secondary source.

Extension

Have students work in groups of two. First, have students come up with a research question related to the history of the United States. Next, have students list four potential sources they could use to research their question: two primary and two secondary sources. As a class, discuss the different sources students listed. If there is disagreement about the categorization of sources, then guide students in a discussion that encourages them to consider the perspective of their peers. Identify sources that could be recategorized if the research question was revised.