

## What is a Primary Source?

The most basic definition of a primary source is something that was written or produced during the time period that a student is investigating. Primary sources are materials directly related to a topic by time or participation.

These materials include letters, speeches, diaries, newspaper articles from the time, oral history interviews, documents, photographs, artifacts, or anything else that provides first-hand accounts about a person or event.

This definition also applies to primary sources found on the Internet. A letter written by President Lincoln in 1862 is a primary source for a student researching the Civil War era. A newspaper article about the Battle of Gettysburg written by a contemporary in July 1863 would be a primary source; but an article about the battle written in June 2001 probably was not written by an eyewitness or participant and would not be a primary source. The memories of a person who took part in the battle also can serve as a primary source. He or she was an eyewitness to and a participant in this historical event at the time.

However, an interview with an expert (a professor of Civil War history, for example) is not a primary source UNLESS that expert actually lived through and has first-hand knowledge of the events being described (highly unlikely for a Civil War historian!).

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