Hi, I’m Stephanie Crowe, the History Librarian at UNCW. In this video, you’ll learn about how to find primary sources for historical research using Randall Library’s catalog and databases. If you need to know what a primary source is and why to use them, you should first view "What is a primary source?" tutorial first.

First, let’s talk about published primary sources. Sometimes, primary sources are available in book form. One way this might happen is if you’re researching a person who has written an autobiography or memoirs.

To find out if Randall Library has anything written by the person you’re researching, go to the library catalog and change the dropdown from keyword to author. Then, type the individual’s name into the box with their last name first.

You can also sometimes find primary sources that have been published as a collection. Published collections of primary sources are often organized around a particular event or theme. To find these published collections, you can search in a similar way to how you’d find other books at Randall Library. Go to the UNCW Library Catalog and start out with a keyword search on your topic.

It will help you here to be very general with your search terms, even if you have already narrowed down your topic to something more specific.

Another tip for searching is that these collections often include a word like "documents" or "sources." So, for example, you might try searching "women's movement" AND documents to find published primary source collections on the women's movement.

A great way of finding additional primary source collections is to use what are called "subject headings." Subject headings are terms in our catalog entries that allow you to navigate through the library catalog to find all of the books published on a particular subject.

Typically, the word "sources" is used to indicate that a particular book contains primary sources. You can click on these to find additional books with the same subject heading. And by the way, this is also a great strategy for finding secondary source books.

Remember that WorldCat is available to help you find published books that we don't have at Randall Library, and that includes published collections of primary sources as well. You can always request these via Interlibrary Loan.

Another way to find primary sources through Randall Library is through our databases. You are probably familiar with using databases such as JSTOR to locate secondary source articles. Randall Library also subscribes to a large number of databases that are specifically focused on primary sources.

The ones you will want to use depend greatly on what your research topic is. One thing that can help, before you start, is to spend a bit of time thinking about what your ideal primary source would look like,
even if you’re skeptical that it exists. In other words, what source would be most likely to provide you with evidence that would help you answer your research question?

As an example, take our sample topic about the history of the women’s movement. If you’re researching how the media portrayed the women’s movement in the 1960s, what types of sources will most likely be useful to you?

There are a couple of ways to find these primary source databases. The first thing you might want to do is check to see if a specific subject or course guide has been created that relates to your topic. From the library homepage, go to “subject and course guides.” These guides were created by librarians and contain suggestions for places you might want to start looking.

If a guide does not exist on your topic, try going databases, look for “databases by type,” and click on “Primary Sources (historical).” These are the primary source databases that Randall Library subscribes to.

Each database includes a description of the subject area and time period it covers, and in many cases also the type of source it contains. For our example of the media portrayal of the women's movement in the 1960s, you might want to scroll down to find our newspaper databases.

You'll use each primary source database differently, but a good rule of thumb for searching for individual primary sources is to put yourself in the mind of the person who would be writing it and use terms based on that.

For that women's movement topic, for example, think about specific people involved in the movement who might have been written about in newspapers, like Gloria Steinem, and try searching for them rather than the general term "women's movement."

This means that it will help you to have at least a basic knowledge of your topic before beginning the search for primary sources, even if it just means browsing Wikipedia or Google for some general background information.

It can also mean that you might not always be comfortable with the terminology that you have to use, because words that are unacceptable now were not always unacceptable at the time.

For help locating primary source databases, or for help searching in any of them, please feel free to contact me!

For help on using the Internet to find primary sources, you view our “Primary Sources” on the open web” tutorial.