I’m Stephanie, the History Librarian at Randall Library. In this short video, you will learn about what a primary source is and why they’re important when you’re writing a research paper in history.

So, what is a “primary source”?

First, I want to briefly mention the difference between primary sources in history and primary sources in the sciences. If you take a science class and your professor mentions primary sources, they're talking about peer-reviewed research articles or conference proceedings in which the researcher describes the results of a research study that they did.

In history, primary sources are defined as firsthand evidence of an event that took place in the past. Examples of primary sources are diaries, correspondence, photographs, newspaper articles, and autobiographies – basically, anything that documents an event as it's happening, or a record of an event by someone who was there as a participant or observer.

For example, if you're doing research on the Women’s March in Washington, D.C. in 2017, primary sources might include photos and videos of the march, social media posts by participants, newspaper articles written about the event, and interviews of people who participated.

By contrast, secondary sources are sources written by historians and other scholars to describe and analyze the past. These types of sources are typically either books or articles, and almost always make use of various primary sources as the main unit of analysis.

A historian of the future writing about the Women’s March would likely try to find primary sources like the ones I just mentioned – photos and videos, social media posts, and newspaper articles, for example - to craft a narrative or argument in a secondary source about what happened that day and why it’s important.

Why are primary sources important?

It might help you to think of primary sources as the raw data that historians use to analyze historical events or time periods. Scientists do original research by conducting experiments to collect data to analyze, but historians do original research by searching for primary sources on their research topic.

With secondary sources, other historians have already made their own interpretations of historical events, but by looking at primary sources, you can interpret them for yourselves.

Think about our example of social media posts about the Women’s March.

You could use them to make arguments about

- the way the Women’s March was perceived by its participants,
- the march as a form of social protest in the early twenty-first century, or
- even the importance of online social networks at the time.

Sometimes whether or not a source is considered primary is dependent on what you’re using it for. If you have questions about a certain source, or about a type of source, talk to your instructor or to me!
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