Documents, buildings, people, recordings or any other providers of information used to interpret a topic are sources. It is your job to select the most valuable and important sources for your research. A long list of sources is not valuable unless the historian uses them to explain a point of view. Don’t assume that your sources contain the ‘truth.’ Instead evaluate the information provided.

### SECONDARY SOURCES

Secondary sources are materials that explain and interpret an event after it happened. The writer is not an eyewitness to, or a participant in, the event.

### PRIMARY SOURCES

A primary source is information created by the event, or in the process of the event. The writer or speaker must be an eyewitness or participant in the event.

1. SECONDARY SOURCES give you background and lead you to the primary sources.

*It's important to start your research by looking at some secondary sources. This will help you understand how to place your topic in the larger historical context. History books and other reference materials help you understand why your topic is important and how it relates to economic, social and political developments of the period. A good National History Day project uses several kinds of secondary sources, in addition to your own original interpretation of primary sources. Look at general reference books to get background on your topic.*

**At School: A great place to start; you will probably find:**

* Encyclopedias
* History textbooks
* General historical works
* Access to the Internet

*Move from the general to the specific. A book on the history of your topic will have more detail than a general textbook. Try a keyword search at a larger library and you will find dozens of books. Another way to find secondary sources on your topic is to check the notes and bibliographies of books you have already found.*

**Public Library: You'll find a larger selection of resources here, and possibly have access to excellent sources through interlibrary loan. Ask at the circulation or reference or information desks about interlibrary loan (ILL). ILL is a way to borrow books or even microfilm from libraries all over the country. At a public library, you can find:**

* Additional reference books
* General historical works
* Access to the Internet
* Access to interlibrary loan
* Video documentaries
* Clipping files: newspaper and magazine articles about local events
* Special collections of many different resources
* Newspapers and magazines

**2. Get to know PRIMARY SOURCES.**

Bibliographies in the backs of general works will lead you to all kinds of interesting primary sources. Here are some basic kinds of primary sources:

**University Libraries: You will find an even wider selection, including unique collections and more access to primary sources. You may not check out these materials if you are not a university student, so come with money for copying, and notebook paper for note-taking.**

* History journal articles
* General historical works
* Historical atlases
* Popular magazine collections
* Previous studies of your topic may include some primary sources

**3. Finding the PRIMARY SOURCES you need.**

Make phone calls, send e-mails, or write to living historical figures--famous and not famous. Contact libraries as well as local, state, and national historical societies and organizations to find out about their collections. Use the online catalogues or guides which many libraries, archives, and historical societies have. Visit historic sites related to your topic to get a feel for where your event took place and to make visual images for an exhibit or documentary. Use the resources at historic sites, and talk to the people who work there.

**Oral history interviews: An oral history interview is an interview with someone about his/her past and role in history. (The person needs to have been a participant in the historical event or period you are investigating.)**

* Personally conducted interviews
* Collections of oral histories

**State and Local Historical Societies and Archives: Ever wonder what's inside those buildings in your community or state capital? Go find out! It's a good idea to do some preliminary research in secondary sources first, and make a few phone calls or look at the institution’s web site. The more specific you are about what you're looking for, the more helpful the staff there can be. Have lots of paper for note-taking and some money for making copies because the historical documents cannot be checked out. You can find:**

* Manuscript Collections
* Letters and Diaries
* Papers of prominent local individuals
* Papers of state and local organizations
* Oral history collections
* Records of government agencies
* Records of births, marriages and deaths
* Collections of photographs
* Brochures and pamphlets
* Reports of state commissions
* Collections of historical objects

## Organizations: Some groups or businesses donate their papers and records to historical societies. Some have their own archival collections. You can call organizations to find out where they keep their historical records. You can try:

* Churches and synagogues
* Fraternal organizations
* Ethnic societies
* Political parties or other political organizations
* Corporations
* Veterans groups
* Settlement houses or community centers
* Charities

**Art Museums: Works of art can be primary sources and can add a great deal to the visual parts of your project. Check out collections with historical significance:**

* Paintings
* Sculptures
* Photographs
* Artifacts

## All Around Your Community: History is everywhere! Look around for:

* Personal records, diaries, letters
* Family and household records
* Photo albums
* Home movies and videos
* Historical artifacts: tools, furniture, etc.
* Places with historic significance (such as monuments, homes or public buildings)