

Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy - Draft for Feedback - 6/9/16

Introduction

Primary sources provide compelling, direct evidence of human activity, whether it occurred yesterday or centuries ago; however, they challenge those who use them. Their creators' intents and biases, their sometimes unique and unfamiliar formats, and the contexts in which they have been preserved (including what may not have been created or preserved) and made accessible, all require critical analysis and thought. Students who encounter primary sources gain a unique window into the subject they are studying, and an opportunity to learn firsthand how primary sources are used to create original research. As they learn to successfully use primary sources, they also gain important skills that help them navigate the use of other information sources, and further develop their critical thinking skills. These guidelines seek to articulate the range of knowledge, skills, and abilities required to effectively use primary sources. This document is intended to be a guide for instructors in a variety of educational environments who seek to create learning experiences for students to improve their use of primary sources.

Definitions

Primary sources are materials in a variety of formats, created at the time under study, that serve as original evidence documenting a time period, event, people, idea, or work. Primary source literacy is the combination of knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary to effectively find, interpret, evaluate, and ethically use primary sources within disciplinary contexts, in order to create new knowledge.

Defining primary source literacy, and primary source, or even source, is inherently problematic. The concept of what makes a source "primary" varies based on the discipline, depends on the interplay

with secondary sources, and relies on the particular research question and the different interpretive processes researchers bring to their projects. Research questions can develop out of encounters with primary sources, or primary sources can be used to refine or answer questions already developed. Success in using these sources also depends on the goals of the learner and thus, primary source literacy is not a binary state, but rather a spectrum. Furthermore, instructors who are teaching these skills may be simultaneously concerned with conveying the excitement of research with primary sources or giving students a memorable or transformative experience while using such sources, both of which are abstract goals which resist assessment, and are not explicitly covered as part of these guidelines.

Primary source literacy is a metaliteracy, intersecting with other other “literacies,” including digital literacy, information literacy, and visual literacy, and engaging with concepts like collective memory, cultural heritage, and individual/cultural perspectives. Thus, students using a primary source in their research, and those who seek to guide them in the process, do not have a straightforward process in front of them. To make some order of this complex landscape, we have identified key concepts that undergird successful work with primary sources. These concepts relate to primary sources in a variety of formats, including original artifacts, both physical and born-digital, and copies, whether digitized or in printed or analog format. Some concepts may not apply to all formats.

Key Concepts

Practical Concepts

There are practical concepts central to work with primary sources, including ideas related to: locating, accessing, and handling primary sources; awareness of repository procedures, how to communicate with special collections professionals, and terminology related to primary source research; awareness of different formats and a basic knowledge of how archival and rare book collections are organized,

described, preserved, and digitized; how ideas, sources, and evidence are documented in primary sources. There are also practical considerations related to the capture and management of primary source research data that can present challenges not faced with other kinds of sources, whether in the form of note taking, transcription, photography, or digital downloads.

Analytical Concepts

Analytical engagement is crucial when working with primary sources. Researchers activate primary sources through hypothesis, analysis, synthesis, interpretation, critical thinking, and evaluation.

Primary source analysis also supports the development of questions and arguments, and engages with questions of artifactuality, historical context, and narrative. In the analytical act of engaging and activating primary sources in a project, the researcher explores technological issues relating to how the sources were produced and delivered. The researcher also recognizes that interpretive mediation relating to a source occurs on a continuum from its creation to its utilization in the production of a creative project, whether written, captured on a visual medium, or performed. Finally, a self-reflective researcher considers primary sources in the context of her own project and in her agency in creating new potential primary sources on a daily basis.

Ethical Concepts

Ethical concepts, involving situational interpretations related to issues of legality, privacy, cultural sensitivity, copyright and intellectual property, and donor rights are important concepts when working with primary sources.

Theoretical Concepts

The researcher should also be aware of the theoretical ideas, concepts, and dispositions underpinning the collection, arrangement, and presentation of rare and archival material that can affect the ultimate analysis of primary sources. These include issues of evidence, authority, power, authenticity, context, the iterative nature of research, the relationship between primary and secondary sources,

physicality, historical empathy, agency, value, absences, and privilege. Archives are always already mediated in some way, while digitized collections reflect selection, digitization, and presentation decisions that may not be self-evident. It is important for users of primary sources to be aware of these interventions.

From Concepts to Outcomes

The key concepts and learning outcomes in these guidelines may be used as a whole or in part depending on particular learning needs and larger programmatic goals, and may be applied differently in different scholarly contexts. They may be used to facilitate discussions between librarians/archivists and faculty/teachers about what students can learn through incorporating primary sources into course curriculums. Instructors, including archivists and librarians, may draw upon the learning outcomes outlined below to develop significant learning experiences and assessment measures appropriate to their specific pedagogical aims. In addition to serving as a catalyst for communication among librarians/archivists and faculty/teachers, this document may also enhance general programming and skill building around primary sources regardless of the target audience. Students and researchers may also consult these guidelines to aid in their self-development in the use of primary sources. The appended bibliography offers suggestions for further exploration of these concepts.

Learning Outcomes

The following learning outcomes are intended to be illustrative and not prescriptive. Instructors developing curriculum or activities to enhance students' understanding of primary sources may wish to use these as is, or adapt them.

A person knowledgeable in the use of primary sources can:

I. Conceptualize

- A. Articulate what might serve as primary sources for a specific research project within the framework of an academic discipline.
- B. Use primary sources to generate and refine research questions.
- C. When interrogating sources with a question(s), understand that the question(s) will inevitably change over time as sources are engaged.
- D. Distinguish primary from secondary and tertiary sources for the question(s) being investigated and the disciplines which frame them.

II. Find

- A. Identify and effectively use strategies and tools to locate and explore potential physical libraries or archives where primary sources for the question(s) being investigated might be found.
- B. Identify and effectively use strategies and tools to locate databases and other online resources where primary sources for the question(s) being investigated might be found.
- C. Use appropriate, efficient, and effective search strategies in order to locate primary sources.
- D. Understand that collections of primary source materials are often impacted by selectivity and mediation, and that databases, aggregators, and physical repositories may demonstrate biases and limitations that affect the content they provide.

III. Interpret, Analyze, and Evaluate

- A. Critically interrogate the creator(s), cultural context(s), and intended audience(s) of a source.
- B. Evaluate the tone, subjectivity, and bias of a source, and their relationship to its original purpose and creator.
- C. Factor physical and material elements into the interpretation of materials, including relationship between container and content, and relationship of copies and surrogates to originals.
- D. Identify and analyze contexts of materials, either through subject knowledge, surrounding or similar documents, knowledge of the creator, or genre/format knowledge.

- E. Articulate various possible reasons for the absence of primary source evidence on a certain topic or from certain types of creators, and the impact of these absences on the research process.
- F. Interrogate silences, absences, and power relationships in the documentary record and use them when significant.
- G. Demonstrate historical empathy, curiosity about the past, and appreciation for historical materials and actors.

IV. Use and Incorporate

- A. Convey information found in primary sources, including summarizing the content of the source and identifying and reporting key components such as author, date, etc.
- B. Analyze strengths and weaknesses of particular sources in meeting the goals of the research or creative project.
- C. Synthesize information from multiple sources to meet the goals of the research or creative project.
- D. Use materials in a manner that is sensitive to cultural mores and religious practices.
- E. Engage in an iterative process of knowledge creation and distribution through citing sources and following publication guidelines and copyright law.

Bibliography

The Joint Task Force is in the process of creating a bibliography of key sources.