

Get : What is evidence? Chris Hinton, John Mury Publishers, 1990.

NOTES RE PRIMARY SOURCES FOR HISTORY CURRICULUM

- A. Examples: diaries, newspapers, letters, parliamentary papers, parliamentary debates, memoirs, statistics, paintings, photographs, newsreel footage, oral histories.

All of these are primary sources because they are contemporary i.e. they date from a particular time and the historian uses them as building blocks in writing history.

B. Common student mistakes:

'Primary sources are reliable because they are first hand evidence from people who were actually there'.

Problems with this simplistic viewpoint:

1. Contemporary observers may have a vested interest in NOT telling the truth i.e. downright lies  
e.g. - a politician preparing his memoirs;  
- a witness before a parliamentary commission.
2. Without actually lying, they may still want to put a particular slant on their views  
e.g. - a minister speaking in parliament to defend his government's record;  
- a witness in the late C19th giving evidence before a committee deciding whether or not to build a railway.
3. Even with the best will in the world, every primary source represents one observer's point of view : it is therefore subjective, not necessarily objective  
e.g. - a European painting scenes of Aboriginal drunkenness in the streets in the C19th must portray that through his own class and social background;  
- often one observer can only see part of the whole e.g. October 1970 anti Vietnam protest, de Tocqueville's differing histories of 1789 and 1848.
4. Primary sources are NOT directed at us - students often assume they are. If you write to your sister, you assume a lot of common background family knowledge which an observer reading that letter 200 years later will not have, should it survive. That is, you may omit certain things because (1) your sister knows them already or (2) you don't want her to know them. The historian is working in the dark.
5. So the historian constantly has to interpret sources - make sense of them. Here is a simple rule in handling original sources i.e. primary sources : They do not speak for themselves : the historian must interpret them.

6. Very often historians will interpret a particular document in VERY different ways. Hence Peter Geyl's famous dictum :  
History is a debate without end.  
e.g. - Bethmann-Hollweg's Manifests of 9/1914  
- The debate about settlement 1785-88.
7. 'Primary source' is in itself a very wide category. A primary source would include all of these:
- (a) Someone who was there and observed accurately what he saw in a diary or letter; but also
  - (b) Someone who was told second (or third hand) and recorded them in a diary; and
  - (c) Memoirs of those same events written long afterwards by the protagonist.

Which of the three is likely to be most reliable?

8. Photographs - students often assume them to be particularly reliable, an exact, mechanical method of reproduction.

But photographs:

- (a) Sometimes are doctored for political purposes  
e.g. Trotsky's removal from photographs
- (b) Sometimes are composed according to artistic perception  
e.g. Australia's war photographs, Hurley
- (c) Sometimes are altered, with the best will in the world, to achieve a desired purpose  
e.g. Hurley wanted to show the complexity of the modern battlefield.
- (d) Sometimes are staged  
e.g. 1937 death of a soldier in Spain  
1945 raising of Old Glory on Iwo Jima
- (e) Always represent choice i.e. there is always someone behind the camera taking a decision to photograph this or that.
- (f) Early on had to be posed  
i.e. for the image to appear.