

How to Read a Primary Source: A PARC Guide for History Students
Introduction: What is a Primary Source
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My objective in this resource is to give you an idea of what your history professors want when they ask for an analysis of primary sources (with an emphasis on the US History General Education courses 17A and B). So, what is a primary source? Why are history professors so obsessed with primary sources? What exactly is their value?

A primary source is defined as something created/made *during the time you are studying.* Anne Frank's famous diary, for example, is a primary source for studying the Holocaust, because it was created during and contains the experiences of someone living through those dark and barbaric events.

Quick note: If you're ever required to find a primary source, a very common example is a newspaper article published during the era you're studying. A great way to find sources in your History 17A and B courses is to go to the Sac State Library's "LibGuides" and find the "Chronicling America" database, which hosts TONS of historical newspapers from 1690 to the present.

What is *not* a primary source: Any source of information on a time period that was not created during that time period. An article published in 1954 (roughly ten years after the Holocaust ended) talking about Anne Frank's diary, for example, is *not* a primary source on the Holocaust (although it *could be* a primary source about what people were thinking about the holocaust IN 1954), because it wasn't created *during* the Holocaust. Your textbook, however useful, is not a primary source, and neither are any scholarly articles your professor assigns you. These last two are secondary sources, which often analyze primary sources and other secondary sources. In a way, you are creating your own secondary source by analyzing a primary source.

Why are primary sources useful? If we want to understand the past (and if you want to get good grades on your papers), we need information about what people were thinking, feeling, writing, creating, and doing at the time. Anne Frank's diary provides us with a lot of information about all those things, as it describes her day to day life hiding from and then living in the midst of Nazi terror. We can learn all sorts of things about what Jewish communities were like, how people used their relationships to hide from the Nazis or attempt to survive, how children dealt with war and fear - we might actually learn things about how effective Nazi police control was from Anne Frank's descriptions (and more!). It could even point us in the direction of more sources!