WHAT IS A PRIMARY SOURCE?

A primary source is any document or artifact created at the time of an event. They may describe an experience or thought about the event. Some examples include: diaries, journals, letters, photographs, maps, recorded film or audio, interviews, speeches, sculptures, statistical data, a statute of government, some newspaper and magazine articles, manuscripts, minutes, fossils, and some original research or experimentation. Primary sources can also be more current. For example, a tweet from the Women’s March can be considered a primary source for that event.

FINDING PRIMARY SOURCES

Using the Novanet catalogue

- Start at libraries.dal.ca
- Click on the magnifying glass to bring up an empty search.
- Click “advanced search.”
- Change the first drop-down menu from “author/creator,” to “subject.”
- Enter the type of resource you are looking for (diary, letter, source).
- On the second line, enter the keywords for your topic.

Many primary sources exist in published books (for example, collections of letters) so be sure to look closely at the results!
Refining Your Search

You can continue to refine your search by subject, or even by the language in which a source was published!

Narrow your search by resource type along the left side of the page. Materials like legal documents, government documents, technical reports, images, and more can be primary sources.

Narrow your search by date range to find material published during the time period that interests you.

The Primary Sources page of the History subject guide lists specific library databases that can be searched and browsed for primary source material. You will also find links on this page to online primary sources for specific historical eras and on specific geographical areas.
Using Online Resources

This History subject guide links to the Newspapers subject guide, where you can find historic collections of newspapers. These online collections can be useful for primary source research.

Local and national archive websites can also help you reach primary sources.

Interested in learning more? Check out our video tutorials on primary sources.

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