Whose Story Is It?
Sorting Primary and Secondary Sources

Historians use two kinds of sources to study the past: primary and secondary.



What is a Primary Source?
A primary source is a piece of evidence created during the time period being studied by someone who actually experienced the event. Think of it as a front-row seat to history — the words, images, or objects come straight from the people who were there. Primary sources don't just record events; they also reveal what people thought, felt, and experienced in the moment.

Examples:

- A diary written by a pioneer traveling west in the 1800s
- A letter from a soldier to his family during the Civil War
- A photograph taken at a civil rights march
- Government documents such as the Declaration of Independence
- A newspaper printed the day after Abraham Lincoln's assassination



What is a Secondary Source?
A secondary source is created after the event by someone who was not there. Instead of being firsthand evidence, it is an interpretation, explanation, or summary of what happened. Secondary sources are useful because they often bring together many different pieces of evidence and provide analysis, but they do not give the raw, unfiltered voices of the past.

Examples:

- A textbook chapter about the American Revolution
- A documentary explaining how the pyramids were built
- A modern biography of Harriet Tubman
- A museum exhibit created to explain the Salem Witch Trials
- A newspaper article published in 2001 reflecting on Pearl Harbor
- An interview with a historian analyzing the fall of the Roman Empire

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Name _____ Date_____

Your Task as Historians
For this activity, we are going to take on the role of historians researching what life was like for soldiers and their families during World War I (1914-1918).

Read each excerpt carefully. Decide whether it is a Primary or Secondary source for that research question. Then explain why.

1. Soldier's Diary (1916)
"March 4, 1916. The mud is everywhere. My boots are soaked through, and the shells keep us awake all night. I haven't seen the sun in weeks."
Source: *Private James Rowe, personal diary, British Army, 1916.*

Primary or Secondary? Why? _____

2. History Textbook (2005)
"The Battle of the Somme was one of the bloodiest campaigns of World War I, resulting in over one million casualties."
Source: *American Union Textbook, 2nd edition, 2005.*

Primary or Secondary? Why? _____

3. Letter from the Front (1917)
"Dear Mother, we went over the top again this morning. The smoke was so thick I could hardly see the men next to me. I pray this war ends soon."
Source: *Corporal Daniel Fisher, letter to his mother, 1917.*

Primary or Secondary? Why? _____

4. WWI Documentary (1998)
"Using newly uncovered photographs, this program explains how trench warfare shaped the lives of ordinary soldiers."
Source: *History Channel, "The Great War," 1998.*

Primary or Secondary? Why? _____

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5. Newspaper Headline (1918)
"Germany Signs Armistice! Crowds Celebrate Peace Across Europe."
Source: *The London Times, November 11, 1918.*

Primary or Secondary? Why? _____

6. History Blog Post (2019)
"Comparing WWI generals to modern military leaders shows how outdated tactics led to staggering casualties."
Source: *“Military History Today” blog, 2019.*

Primary or Secondary? Why? _____

7. Oral History Interview (1975)
"I was just a boy when my brother went to war. I remember the day he came home with one arm gone, but smiling that he had survived."
Source: *Interview with Harold Martin, conducted 1975.*

Primary or Secondary? Why? _____

8. Mother’s Memory (1952)
"My son went to France in 1917. He wrote every week until the day he was killed at the Somme. I still keep his letters in the top drawer of my dresser."
Source: *Interview with Mrs. Clara Dawson, conducted 1952.*

Primary or Secondary? Why? _____

9. Memoir Published After the War (1925)
"When I think back to Passchendaele, all I see is mud — men and horses sinking into it, never to come out."
Source: *Captain William Clarke, Mud and Fire: My Memories of the Great War, 1925.*

Primary or Secondary? Why? _____

10. Magazine Article Looking Back (1920)
"The Great War stands as a reminder of the courage of our boys overseas and the sacrifices made for liberty."
Source: *Saturday Evening Post, 1920.*

Primary or Secondary? Why? _____

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11. Nurse's Letter from the Front (1916)
"The wounded keep coming faster than we can treat them. I stitched for fourteen hours yesterday without rest."
Source: *Nurse Emily Carver, letter to her sister, 1916.*

Primary or Secondary? Why? _____

12. WWI Textbook (1985)
"The entry of the United States into the war in 1917 tipped the balance in favor of the Allies."
Source: *World at War Textbook, 1985 edition.*

Primary or Secondary? Why? _____

13. Photograph of Trenches (1917)
(Caption text) "British soldiers in a trench near Ypres, 1917."
Source: *Photo by Lt. George Mills, Imperial War Museum Collection.*

Primary or Secondary? Why? _____

14. Speech by President Wilson (1917)
"The world must be made safe for democracy."
Source: *Woodrow Wilson, Address to Congress, April 2, 1917.*

Primary or Secondary? Why? _____

15. Museum Exhibit Text (2008)
"Trench art, such as this decorated shell casing, shows how soldiers transformed instruments of war into keepsakes."
Source: *Smithsonian National Museum of American History, WWI exhibit, 2008.*

Primary or Secondary? Why? _____