|  |
| --- |
| Using Primary Sources |
|  | The detective investigates a crime that was committed in the past. He looks for evidence such as fingerprints or witnesses or articles that link the suspect and the crime. Likewise the historian looks for evidence such as letters, diaries, court documents, objects used by the people being studied, and buildings where the people lived. After gathering evidence from primary sources, the historian creates a secondary source by writing about the findings, analyzing them, or putting them together into a story about the past. Martha Ballard’s diary is a primary source. Laurel Ulrich’s book about Martha Ballard’s diary is a secondary source.  A secondary source used differently can become a primary source. For example, in the nineteenth century, histories were written about many U.S. towns and cities. As history books, they would be classified as secondary sources. Today, however, we can read one of these same town histories to find evidence of the author’s life, times, and world view.  The historian’s primary source is evidence from the past. A secondary source uses evidence from primary sources to try to figure out the past. The historian’s dream is to find fresh evidence from the past and, from that evidence, to create a fresh interpretation of history.  **First Ask These Questions**  Historians go to primary sources in the search for evidence to answer questions about what happened in the past and why. When working with primary sources, answering a series of basic questions can help us draw more accurate conclusions.  When trying to gather evidence from a primary source, first try to answer these basic questions. (You may not have enough information to do so.)   1. What is it? 2. Who wrote or made it? 3. When was it written or made? 4. Where was it written or made? 5. How was it written or made? 6. What evidence does this source contribute to my research?   **Then Ask, What Is The Meaning of This Primary Source?**   1. Why was this document/object written or made? 2. Who was the intended audience/user? 3. What questions does this source raise? What don’t we know about this source? 4. What other information do we have about this document or object? 5. What other sources are like this one? 6. What other sources might help answer our questions about this one? 7. What else do we need to know in order to understand the evidence in this source? 8. What have others said about this or similar sources? 9. How does this source help me to answer my research question? 10. How does evidence from this source alter or fit into existing interpretations of the past? |