

BUILDING HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND CONDUCTING RESEARCH

I have my topic and I know how it is connected to the NHD theme. What do I do next? Build historical context by reading different types of sources...

Nothing in history happens in a vacuum. To understand the connections between your topic and the time period, begin reading about the time period and as you read ask yourself questions: why did my topic happen at this particular time and in this particular place? What were the events or the influences that came before my topic? How was my topic influenced by and how did it influence the economic, social, political, and cultural climate of the time period? All of these questions will help you to build the story of your topic and grasp the historical significance.

While you are researching a topic for an NHD project, you will read different types of sources: tertiary sources, secondary sources, and primary sources.

Primary Sources

A primary source is a piece of information about a historical event or period in which the creator of the source was an actual participant in or a contemporary of a historical moment. The purpose of primary sources is to capture the words, the thoughts and the intentions of the past. Primary sources help you to interpret what happened and why it happened.

Examples of primary sources include **documents, letters, diaries, artifacts, photographs, historic sites, songs, or other written and tangible items** created during the historical period you are studying.

Secondary Sources

A secondary source is a source that was not created first-hand by someone who participated in the historical era. Secondary sources are usually created by historians, but based on the historian's reading of primary sources. Secondary sources are usually written decades, if not centuries, after the event occurred by people who did not live through or participate in the event or issue. The purpose of a secondary source is to help build the story of your research from multiple perspectives and to give your research historical context.

An example of a secondary source is *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* by James M. McPherson, published in 1988. Secondary sources are a great starting point in helping you see the big picture. Understanding the context of your topic will help you make sense of the primary sources that you find.

The primary and secondary sources McPherson used are listed in the bibliography. Another researcher might consult these same primary sources and reach a different conclusion.

When searching for secondary sources, look to **magazine articles, history compilations or books on a specific subject, history textbooks, interviews with experts (historians, professors, etc.), etc.**

Tertiary Sources

Tertiary sources are based on a collection of primary and secondary sources and may or may not be written by an expert. Tertiary sources should never appear in your bibliography but are only used as exploratory sources, to give you ideas about what to research. Wikipedia is not a reliable source and should not be utilized or appear in your bibliography.

Examples are **dictionaries, encyclopedias, fact books, and guidebooks.**

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