

Using Primary Sources in the Classroom

When a detective investigates a crime, she looks for evidence – fingerprints, witnesses, and other traces - that help explain the crime. In the same way, a historian looks to evidence to reconstruct the past; evidence such as documents, objects, photographs, and oral histories, even the buildings and traditional areas where the people lived.

A **primary source** is a first-hand, eye-witness account, record, or evidence about a person, place, or an event. Oral histories, interviews, speeches, objects, artistic works (musical and visual arts), photographs, and documents such as newspapers, legal and business documents, treaties, census and military records, diaries, literary memoirs, journals, and inventories are primary sources.

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. A **secondary source** is an account, record, or evidence derived from an original or primary source. Textbooks are examples of secondary sources.

Secondary sources are further removed from the events and often reflect the author's biases. Using primary sources enables you to work with the raw material and draw your own conclusions.



Primary sources at the Treaty Relations Commission of Manitoba

There are several examples of primary sources found at www.trcm.ca. They include:

- the texts of Treaties Number 1 through 5 as well as the texts from the adhesions to Treaty No. 5, Treaty No. 6, and Treaty No. 10;
- video gallery featuring Elders and a variety of other speakers;
- and a photo gallery featuring an archive of historical photographs and maps;

You may also make arrangements to visit the TRCM office in Winnipeg. The TRCM Resource Library continues to expand and contains many to original documents. The TRCM requires the use of the material on location or use by way of reproduction.



Engaging with primary sources

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.

After gathering primary sources

First, ask these questions:

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:

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?

