

Source Types: Value and Limitations

Primary Sources:

In general:

Values:

- provide first-hand knowledge of the events / topics
- Give a 'snapshot' of opinion at the time.

Limitations:

- Often too wrapped up in their moment, so authors often miss the 'big picture' of their situations
- Sometimes subject to censorship

Private letters, diaries, memoirs

Values:

- Can provide an intimate glimpse into the effects of historical events and the lives of individuals experiencing them first-hand
- If the source was never intended to be read by a large audience, its contents might be of a more candid and revealing nature.
- Valuable as a study of the personality by whom it was written

Limitations:

- If the document was intended for disclosure, it runs the risk of being an apology, contrived to justify or defend the author's opinions or actions/inactions
- Such a personal documents are inherently limited in their scope in that they present only one viewpoint, one interpretation of what happened.
- Inevitably biased- molded by the opinions, prejudices, and cultural standpoint of the author (must be read critically)
- If the document is a result of recollections many years after the period described, the details might have become blurred with the passing of time, certain aspects consciously or subconsciously forgotten, and memoirs molded to conform to views evolved since then (i.e. benefit of hindsight).
- Selective by nature, more important in what is excluded than included)

Poems, novels

Values:

- Can provide an interesting perspective into the spirit and culture of the time in which they were written
- Can chronicle the experiences and feelings of specific individuals living through a period of history, providing a focused and personal portrait of a time
- Often offer an emotional appeal, allowing the reader to identify more closely with circumstances and individuals of a time
- Can provide information on a certain period of history in more easily digestible format through engaging the interest of the reader

Limitations:

- Often not solely concerned with providing a factual account- a certain degree of imagination and creative license involved, and, therefore, perhaps not as useful as a factual account of history.
- Inevitably flavored by biases of creator.

Drawings, paintings, cartoons

Values:

- Can effectively capture the spirit of a time, and the opinions and sentiments generally characterizing that time.

- Contain evidence about a culture at specific moments in history- its customs, styles, preferences, atmosphere, architecture, manner of dress, appearance.
- Provide a visually stimulating piece of historical evidence.
- Examples of art styles of the time.
- Comment on features of regime.
- Can show how people viewed a time.

Limitations:

- Produced by an artist with a definite point of view, and therefore inevitably biased, being influenced by the opinions and prejudices of its creator.
- Limited scope- generally highlights one specific aspect of a period of history.
- Artist not generally concerned with providing a factual account of a historical event or circumstance, but rather with producing a creative piece of work or expressing own opinions and emotional reactions.

Photographs/Film

Values:

- Can capture moments in history in vivid detail, providing a unique glimpse into a point in time and simulating piece of historical evidence.
- Examples of propaganda
- Can show aspects of the culture-i.e. dress
- Often posed
- Reflections of attitudes, trends in filmmaking at a specific time.

Limitations:

- Behind every photograph of film is a creator with own personal biases and prejudices, which may be reflected in a work, either consciously or subconsciously.
- Can be manipulated by the creator to convey a certain point or impress upon the viewer his/her own conceptions. e.g.:
 - parts can be edited
 - parts can be cut out
 - certain details can be excluded or downplayed
 - certain details can be accentuated or focused on
 - angle the photographs are taken from naturally limit perspective and therefore can be used to create visual bias
- The creator ultimately holds the power to decide the impression conveyed by the photograph or film (more important than the photographs is the photographer).
- Tendency- for commercial reasons, to lack scenes which are graphic and interesting.

Newspapers

Values:

- Can provide indication of the nature of a society and on specific aspects of its culture.
- Can provide a daily record of events occurring in history (albeit perhaps a limited one).

Limitations:

- A product of the societies in which they are produced, and therefore offering only a limited perspective.
- In a dictatorship, certain details might be suppressed to preserve the authority of the government in power- censorship.
- A newspaper might be primarily an instrument of propaganda.
- Commercial motives
- All have political agendas

Statistics

Values:

- Provide a raw factual evidence of historical trends (provided they are reliable).

- Generally open to interpretation, free of the potent influence of personal and cultural biases (provided they have not been manipulated).

Limitations:

- Can be manipulated, for example by government's wishing to corroborate claims or present themselves in a favorable light, and their accuracy must therefore be questioned.
- Might represent only a limited sampling, not representative of the general population.
- Margins of error must be taken into account.
- Always produced for a specific purpose.
- Size/nature of sample?

Government Records

Values:

- If never intended for disclosure, might provide a candid glimpse into the inner-workings of a government.
- Purely factual, solid, reliable.

Limitations:

- If their disclosure was anticipated could have been manipulated, perhaps to conceal scandalous happenings or illegal maneuverings, or to maintain the image of the government concerned.
- Only what the government allows the public to know.

Oral history (interviews with participants in historical events)

Values:

- Provides a means of learning about the past from individual with first-hand knowledge of historical events.
- Provides important historical evidence about people, especially minority groups, who might have been excluded from mainstream publications or didn't leave behind written primary sources.
- A means of preserving details of historical legacies that might not have been included in written accounts.
- Opinions held by people who experienced a period of history
- Interpretations must be corroborated

Limitations:

- If the person being interviewed has aged significantly in the period of time between the actual experience and the interview, the physical and mental deterioration of the subjects must be taken into account- e.g. memory loss, emotional trauma.
- If the story is being recounted a significant time after the period of history under scrutiny, details might have become confused over the passage of time or faded entirely from memory, and traumatic experiences might have been deliberately forgotten. Thus, accuracy must be questioned.
- Experiences in the present might influence accounts of the past, and a person with the benefit of hindsight might be compelled to reassess events and reconstruct their memories accordingly.
- Personal opinions, cultural backgrounds, must be taken into account in interpreting the information conveyed, as well as his/her motives in sharing memories- the individual might feel more compelled to justify own actions/inactions and perspectives than to paint an entirely balanced and accurate account of events and circumstances.
- Tend to be apologies
- Highly subjective

Secondary Sources:

In general:

Values:

- Can provide the clarity that comes with hindsight
- Due to distance from events, can be more objectively written and referenced

Limitations:

- Often provide a narrow depth study or a superficial overview of a topic or event

Examples of humanities secondary sources:

- Books written by professional historians
- Books written by professional geographers
- Books written by professional philosophers
- Books written by professional psychologists
- Books written by professional sociologists
- Books written by professional political analysts
- Books written by professional economists

Tertiary Sources:

In general, useful only as a “backstory” reference. **Humanities writers should avoid referencing any tertiary information** in their research papers. Some specialized humanities encyclopedias available through the GSIS Library are an exception to this guideline.

General Encyclopedias (e.g. Encyclopedia Britannica, World Book, etc.)

Value:

- Gives a broad overview of a topic
- Are maintained by professional editorial staff.
- Articles are generally well-researched and well-written.

Limitation:

- Its purpose is to meet the needs of a general audience, not a humanities-knowledgeable audience.
- Very difficult to evaluate what facts were used to reach the conclusions presented because encyclopedia authors based their writings on others’ conclusions, not on primary research.

Specialized Encyclopedias and Textbooks (e.g. American History Online, Ancient and Medieval History Online, History Reference Center, Modern World History Online, World Geography and Culture, World Religions Online, etc.)

Value:

- Gives a focused overview of a topic
- Are maintained by professional editorial staff.
- Articles are usually well-researched and well-written.
- Can sometimes meet the needs of a humanities-knowledgeable audience.

Limitation:

- Sometimes difficult to evaluate what facts were used to reach the conclusions presented, because even specialized encyclopedia and textbook authors usually base their writings on others’ conclusions, not on primary research.

Commercially- or Government-Sponsored Encyclopedias / Factbooks / Guides

Values:

- Can provide indication of the nature of a society and on specific aspects of its culture.
- Can provide examples of propaganda
- Relatively low cost of publishing allows for very specific, narrow-audience information to be made available to everyone.

Limitations:

- Information could have been manipulated, perhaps to hide scandalous happenings or illegal maneuverings, or to maintain the image of the business / government / area concerned.
- Only what the government or business allows the public to know.

Wikis

Values:

- Especially useful when new and up-to-date information needs to be gathered swiftly.
- Low cost of publishing allows for very specific, narrow-audience information to be made available to everyone.

Limitations:

- Authors do not have to identify themselves openly or honestly therefore it is usually impossible to determine, with any certainty, his or her true purpose, qualifications or bias.
- Authors do not have to be qualified to speak on a topic that they may or may not be properly educated on.
- Authors are free to lie about facts, their identity, and their qualifications. There are no controls against or consequences for lying.

Blogs (can be primary, secondary, or tertiary sources)

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- Valuable as a study of the personality by whom it was written

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- Authors are free to lie about facts, their identity, and their qualifications. There are no controls against or consequences for lying.
- Extremely impermanent. A URL link to particular information may not stay valid for longer than a week. This often renders corroborating verification of the source impossible.