**Finding and Evaluating Primary Sources**

**AIMS:**

* Explain what primary sources are and the value of using primary sources in academic work.
* To teach students how to find and identify reliable and useful primary sources.
* Highlight what to look for when evaluating a primary source.

**Lecture:**

In order to find and evaluate primary sources, students must know what primary sources are and the value of using primary sources in their work. The lesson is thus structured as follows: *What are primary sources?, Why should you use primary sources?, Finding primary sources, Evaluating primary sources* and a brief note on *Using primary sources*.

**What are Primary Sources?**

*Primary sources* are first-hand accounts or original materials concerning a particular topic or phenomenon. They are often created by people who were present and/or directly involved in the event, created at the time the event happened or in certain instances, at a later time; such as autobiographies or oral histories recorded later on. A researcher’s records from experiments or field research, are also primary sources. The information recorded in these sources becomes the basis for other research (secondary sources). Primary sources are therefore original materials created at the time of an event or soon afterwards.

*Secondary sources* are sources in which the author or creator is writing using the observations of others; secondary sources usually interpret primary sources. Secondary sources describe, interpret, analyse, evaluate, explain or comment on & thus build arguments on the particular topic using the available primary resources. Using secondary sources is a simple way to find out what is already known about the topic under investigation.

**Types of primary sources include:**

*Original Documents*: speeches, interviews, official records, statistical data from a survey/ questionnaire, official transcripts of a government proceeding, letters, journals, speeches, manuscripts and interviews. They may also include published pieces such as newspaper or magazine articles which were written soon after the event), photographs, audio or video recordings, research reports in the natural or social sciences.

*Creative work*s: drama, poetry, novels, music, art, etc.

*Relics or artefacts:* buildings, pottery, furniture, etc.

**Examples of Primary Sources**:

Change/add to these examples using primary sources relevant to the course:

* The Diary of Anne Frank – (Experiences of a Jewish family during WWII)
* Apartheid Legislation: The Prohibition of Mixed Marriages Act, Act No 55 of 1949
* Afrobarometer surveys
* From the Front Line, Speeches of Sir Seretse Khama by Seretse Khama; compiled by: Gwendolen M. Carter; E. Philip Morgan.

**Why should you use Primary Sources?**

Research is more meaningful when it uses authentic evidence, empirical data and original documents rather than on the interpretations, opinions and explanations of others. This therefore allows for your own interpretation to be formed based on the evidence you have found and prior knowledge. For instance, research that relates to government/its functions and processes must use government documents as they are direct evidence of the government’s policies, strategies and activities. These documents are therefore an indispensable primary source and add more value to your work than simply relying on a secondary source which has interpreted these documents on your behalf (and possibly overlooked points which may be relevant to your research). Primary sources are, however, usually a small piece of the whole topic; additional evidence must be used to put the primary source in context and to form valuable interpretations.

*Note*: Using Primary sources will therefore help students build their critical thinking skills, as using primary sources requires students to be analytical, examine sources thoughtfully and to assess what more they need to know to make inferences from the sources.

**Finding Primary Sources**

Knowing what to look for is the hardest part of finding primary sources. Start by reading secondary sources on the topic under investigation, this gives you a foundation on the different ways the primary sources have been interpreted but also a good general understanding of the topic (identify key names and events). Additionally, looking through the reference list of these sources is a good way of finding primary sources.

A quick search on the library website, academic portals or search engines will give you access to these sources. The UCT Library, particularly the Special Collections, Government Publications and African Studies libraries have a wide range of primary sources.

**Primary Sources Online**

Most of the primary sources available online are transcriptions or reproductions, thus learning how to evaluate how well the version you’re using represents the original source is important. In general, the source must provide a citation for the source from which it is reproduced and it must state how this information has been reproduced – explanation on how they have been digitised/ transcribed/translated (when & by whom). Below are some questions to help you assess if the source you have found is a valid primary source:

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
|  | Yes/No |
| Is the website a reputable/academic one? |  |
| Is there contact information on the site where you have accessed this source? |  |
| Is it clear who created the document? |  |
| Is there information on where the original document is? (most reputable institutions/website will provide this information) |  |
| Is the document a scan of the original source? |  |
| If it is a translated copy, is the original document available for comparison? |  |
| Does the content of the document make sense in light of the other information you have on the topic? |  |

**Evaluating Primary Sources**

It is important to evaluate the validity and usefulness of the source, so that you may understand the value and limitations of the source and therefore in what way you can use the source in your work. The questions below are a guide on how to evaluate a primary source, but may not be applicable to all types of primary sources.

*The Author*

* Who created the source? What motives did the author have?
* Was the author a participant or observer? / is it first-hand knowledge or a report of others knowledge/views.
* What factors may have influenced the author’s viewpoint and writing? (Class, ethnicity gender etc.).
* Can you detect a bias? Try to determine as much as possible, the relationship of the author to the events/the issues described. Does the author have a stake in how the event is remembered? Pay attention to the vocabulary of the author, what opinions/assumptions are implicitly stated in their choice of words?

*Date Produced/Published*

* When was the source written?
* Was the source written during, immediately or a long time after the event/phenomenon under investigation?
* Is this the only version/edition of the source? (later editions may be revised)
* What was the social, economic, and political context of that time? How might this affect the information within the source?

*Purpose*

* What is the purpose of the source? /why was it created? (Under what circumstances was it created?)
* Was the document meant to be private (e.g. diaries – although some authors intended for their diaries to be read) or for a small audience (letters/ internal reports) or a larger audience (speech or published autobiography)? If the source was intended to be public, does it attempt to inform or persuade? (Is the author objective or persuasive?).
* What was the significance of this document at the time it was written/published? Did the documents publication have anticipated/ unanticipated consequences/effects? How has/does this document contributed to the knowledge on the subject/topic?

*Reliability*

* If the document was translated from another language, may have this altered the document’s meaning? (*tone & content* – a lot may be lost in translation/ this affects your ability to analyse the language used and therefore understand the implicit statements within the text)
* Is the information fact, opinion or propaganda?
* Is the information supported by evidence/other witnesses? Does it downplay or exclude information that other sources highlight? (Why?)

*Note:*

1. Eyewitness accounts can be purposely distorted in order to avoid blame/offer praise.
2. Do not assume that one type of document is necessarily more reliable than another, for example, a news article may be just as a biased –bias from the reporter/editors views.
3. To assess the reliability of the evidence, check the details against another primary source (if any). If the sources differ, attempt to find possible explanations for the differences (start with the various questions stated above on the author). If the sources concur, then the information may be more accurate.

**Using the Primary Source**

Remind students to:

* Determine how the source relates to the main themes of the course, the topic as a whole and other primary and secondary sources, this will help them decide what primary source to use and how much of their argument can rely on this source.

***Example:***

This is an example of the types of primary sources students may use in answering a research/essay question. Please change this question to suit the specific course or the topics you’d like covered.

**How have perceptions of democracy changed in South Africa since 1994?**

* Afrobarometer Surveys: Afrobarometer is a research project that measures the social, political, and economic atmosphere in Africa (every 4 years).
* Voter registration figures from the IEC: increase or decrease-this information can then be used to make an argument in response to the question.
* Political party manifesto’s and/or campaigns: are the issues the political parties are campaigning on different over the years, in what way.

***Exercise:***

Ask the students to identify 3 Primary sources they would use to answer the questions below (they must explain how they will use that source):

Please change these questions to suit the specific course or the topics you’d like covered.

1. **Is the Judiciary an independent institution in South Africa?**

Possible Responses:

* *Constitution*: does the constitution guarantee the independence of the constitution?
* *Rulings on cases involving political figures/the government*: is there evidence of political influence in the judiciary/ is the judiciary impartial in their rulings in government?
* *Department of Justice and Constitutional Development Annual Reports*: information on how the judiciary functions and identification of possible areas where its independence in its everyday functioning is limited.

**2. How is South Africa’s foreign policy in Africa different under the tenure of President Zuma as compared to that of Thabo Mbeki?**

Possible responses:

* *Constitution:* to understand the role of the President in foreign policy decision making.
* *Speeches of President Zuma and Mbeki*: what they have said which may serve as an indicator of their foreign policy position.
* *Newspapers/Presidency Press Releases:* for information on foreign policy decisions/actions e.g. deployment of Military for peacekeeping operations.

1. **What effect did the 1929 great depression have on government spending in South Africa?**

Possible responses:

* *Parliamentary session discussions:* budget discussions, priorities set/ changes in spending agreed upon.
* *Newspapers articles from the period:* a reduction in social spending or any significant changes will be noted there.
* *Government Budget from before and after the depression:* compare spending before and after the depression.

*Remember:*

* Avoid simply summarising the source in your work – analyse/evaluate the source.
* Avoid using too many quotes from the primary source/s. Although the use of a primary source in your discussion adds value to your work (credibility for your argument). The essay should be an analysis of the source and should not be made up of too many quotes as this also limits the space you have to develop your argument.



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