**Searching for Primary Sources -- Some Questions to Ask Yourself**

### What might be considered Primary Materials?

| Which of these relate to my topic? | Autobiographies, correspondence, diaries, memoirs, newspapers and magazines written at the time, original manuscripts, government and organization documents, legal cases and opinions, hearings, census materials, statistics, oral history, interviews, photographs, paintings, advertisements, films, audio and video recordings, etc. |

**Note:**

- **Primary materials** are usually contemporary to the person or event.
- **Secondary materials** use or analyze primary materials. Aim for recent publications that reflect the latest scholarship.

### Questions Concerning Individuals related to your Topic

#### Places to look for Answers

- **Did the individual or related people write letters, diaries, journals, or autobiographies** which were published?
  - Do an [author search](#) in library catalogs (last name, first name)
    - Try [Midcat](#), then [NExpress](#), then [Worldcat](#).
  - Or try a [keyword search](#): ex. **cuba and revolution and diaries**
  - **person’s name** and (correspondence or letters)
  - Also check bibliographies related to the person, event or period.

- **Who were the family members, friends, enemies, associates who might have commented on the individual, especially in a memoir?**
  - Make a list of them and search for their publications, as above.

- **Is it likely someone has written a full-length biography or study of the person?**
  - Do a [subject search](#) in library catalogs (last name, first name)

### Questions Concerning Events and Periods

#### Places to look for Answers

- **Which newspapers and magazines** might have covered relevant events?
  - You may discover relevant ones cited in your other readings. Check the library’s [Newspaper Guide](#) and the [History Research Guides](#) for digital collections of historical newspapers and journals (ex.[ProQuest Historical Newspapers](#), [PAO](#), etc.) or use [Summon](#) & restrict by date.

- **Are these newspapers, magazines available here or available on microform?**
  - Do a [Midcat](#), [Worldcat](#), or [CRL Catalog](#) search by [title](#) of the publication (if known) or search by subject for newspapers or periodicals from a country and limit by language.
  - Another resource is the [Newspapers in Microform](#) (ILL Office).

- **Is there indexing available or do I need to zero in on certain dates, periods?**
  - For newspapers, try using another paper’s index like the [New York Times](#) or [The Times (London)](#) to pinpoint the date(s) it was covered in the press.
Questions Concerning Events and Periods cont.

Would the government have published something on the topic?

Governments collect and publish information on almost every aspect of public life. U.S. documents published after 1976 are listed in Midcat if we own them. There are print indexes for earlier years. For non-U.S. gov't docs, look for books that reprint them or get exact citations from bibliographies of secondary works (so you can request them thru ILL).

If the original documents are not accessible, could there be reprints available?

Search in library catalogs by keyword using the term "sources", ex. japan and history and sources

Are there churches, organizations, corporations involved?

These groups often have publications, archives, annual reports.

Would statistics help to substantiate my thesis?

In addition to government statistics published at the time, compilations of historical statistics exist, ex. International Historical Statistics, Europe 1750-2000.

How might I find the accounts of events, periods by lesser-known people?

The sub-heading, "personal narratives", will sometimes identify such works, ex. crusades and personal narratives

Are there visual materials that would aid my understanding?

Search library catalogs, but limit to: videos

(Use the subheading – pictorial works
Also try ARTStor (library image database)

Questions re: Special Collections, Archives, Manuscripts

Places to Look for Answers

If you have the option of travel, you may widen your opportunities for materials enormously.

Don’t forget to check the holdings of our own Special Collections.

Do a Midcat search restricted to “Special Collections”

If I find manuscripts or archival material in Worldcat or listed in a bibliography, how can I get access?

Check library catalogs in case it is on microfilm. However, you may have to travel to another library to use the material. Before visiting, call the library to find out what restrictions they may have (i.e. are they open on weekends, do you need special permission?)

Is manuscript material ever on microfilm and available for loan?

Yes, occasionally. If Worldcat or CRL catalog indicates it is on microfilm, you can try to get it on interlibrary loan.

Are there other possibilities to consider?

Yes, probably. Each topic has unique possibilities. Discuss your needs with your professor and ask for help or a research consultation from a librarian.

B. Ellis  2011 (adapted from P. Gray)