

# Conducting Research: Primary Sources

Primary source documents are the means by which historians travel through time to explore previous generations and discover exciting bonds in the human experience. Eyewitness accounts, for instance, provide a rich and descriptive portal to view and interpret the past. Primary sources are a crucial part of any historical research.

**To determine if a source is primary, remember that it must have been created**

1. **During the time** period being studied.  
OR
2. **By a participant** in the event being studied.

❖ **The following are common examples of primary sources:**

- Books
- Memoirs, letters, interviews, autobiographies, or diaries
- Newspaper, magazine, or journal articles
- Records of or materials published by an organization
- Records of government agencies
- Manuscript collections
- Speeches
- Photographs
- Audio or video recordings
- Public opinion polls
- Novels or movies
- Artwork
- Political cartoons or comics



**TOP  
SECRET**

**Questions to ask yourself as you INTERPRET the source:**

- Who is the author/creator of the source?
- What are the author's biases?
- Why was the source produced?
  - Was there a hidden agenda?
  - Was it a piece of propaganda?
- How does this source compare with other documents?
- In what historical context must the source be considered?
- Do the language and depictions used reflect the time period?
- When was the source created in relation to the event?
  - Be critical of memoirs created later in life, as memories become less accurate.

**See reverse side for an example of a primary source document.**

# Primary Sources Continued

Review the primary source document below and brainstorm possible ways this source could be interpreted by historians.



- ❖ **What is the source?**
  - *The Detroit Journal* published this political cartoon.
- ❖ **When was the source created?**
  - It was published in 1907.
- ❖ **What is the source depicting?**
  - Uncle Sam is coaxing an African-American child who represents the nation of Cuba.
- ❖ **In what historical context must this source be considered?**
  - Following the Spanish-American War, U.S. congressmen initiated the Platt Amendment, which allowed U.S. officials to supervise policies and intervene in Cuban affairs. Many American politicians argued that Cuba, like a small child, was unable to make decisions for herself.
- ❖ **What are some possible biases or hidden agendas of the author?**
  - This cartoon shows that racial bias towards Cubans was used in propaganda targeted at U.S. citizens in order to gain support for the Platt Amendment.
- ❖ **After you have reviewed the source, ask yourself how a historian might use this source as evidence to support a thesis. Ask yourself these important questions:**
  - Were Cubans really incapable of self-government?
  - How would Cubans react to the cartoon?
  - Why did the U.S. choose to portray Cuba in that way?

**A Turabian citation for this source would look like this:**

Thomas May, "Cuba's Freedom Is Not Far Off," *Detroit Journal*, 1907, published in Jules R. Benjamin, *The United States and the Origins of the Cuban Revolution: An Empire of Liberty in an Age of National Liberation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 74.