



Finding Primary Sources: Initial Strategies and Library Catalogs

What is a primary source?

Librarians define primary sources as: “original records created at the time historical events occurred or well after events in the form of memoirs and oral histories. Primary sources may include letters, manuscripts, diaries, journals, newspapers, speeches, interviews, memoirs, documents produced by government agencies such as Congress or the Office of the President, photographs, audio recordings, moving pictures or video recordings, research data, and objects or artifacts such as works of art or ancient roads, buildings, tools, and weapons.” *

Primary sources are the “raw material by which we interpret our human past.” Yet identifying and obtaining primary source material in English translation can sometimes be a challenge. Here are some tips for effective research.

*ACRL



Stop and think...

Students often jump right in and start searching without a preliminary investigation of their topic. They then become frustrated when their library catalog searches return *zero* results while, in the meantime, their Google search returns 928,996,102 hits So first:

- Do some preparatory reading on your topic. Reference books, your course readings, even Internet sites can be good places to *start*. Use these secondary sources to give you the **cultural & historical context** - the who, what, when, where and why - of your subject. You don't need to read *every* book on your topic, you simply need to be armed with **enough general knowledge** to realize what evidence might be available to you and how to interpret it.
- Think about primary sources and what they can reveal to you. Make a list of possible primary sources of information on your topic. Consider how you could utilize each to help answer or assert your thesis. What might personal letters and diaries reveal? What about official correspondences or speeches, treaties, royal decrees? How about civil documents like wills, court cases, marriage records, prison roles? Census or tax assessor records? Business contracts and guildhall records or inventories? What about Church documents? Don't forget the common artifacts of everyday life: Old advice & etiquette books, cookbooks, limericks and song lyrics, etc.



Try a focus...

One tactic is to identify a specific document or types of documents that could prove or disprove your thesis. It's sometimes easier to find: 1. a named text, known correspondences, a famous trial, published memoirs, etc *or* 2. texts related to a specific important event. For example, which of the following requests do you think will more quickly garner a successful outcome?

"I want to find a translation of the *Code of Hammurabi*"

OR

"I'm looking for some ancient laws. Do you happen have any lying around?"

Ways to identify sources:

- Look at the works cited list (or bibliography), footnotes and parenthetical references included in secondary sources. Begin with your course textbook(s) and then major history books or reference books, and/or scholarly articles, on your subject. **What primary sources are identified in these readings? What sources do these authors use or suggest for further study?**
- Look over your class notes. **Has your professor mentioned any important primary texts?** Talk to her / him about your research interests and ask them to recommend appropriate historical sources.
- Use standard reference sources like encyclopedias to point you to available resources. They often list the major primary texts related to a topic or person.
- If you can't find or think of one, don't give up. See below for ways to keyword search for primary sources by subject area, historical era or geographical location.

Realize that exactly what you're looking for may not exist or have survived, or might not be readily available to you in English translation... Be prepared to widen your search, broaden your topic or otherwise alter your strategy.



Using [Library Catalogs](#) to Find Primary Sources

Search tips:

- If you're looking for text(s) authored by a person, simply search for them as an author (Example: [Luther, Martin](#)) in the library's catalog.
- If the document itself is a well-known or oft-cited text, search by the title (Example: [Malleus Maleficarum](#)).

- Get to know the Library of Congress **subject headings** useful to your topic. For example, if you are researching women's domestic life during the Middle Ages, realize that "[women](#)" is not the only subject keyword you could use. You might also find good sources under these subject headings: "social life and customs," "family," "households," "marriage customs and rites," "domestic relations," "sex role," etc.
- Include the word "sources" or one of the other words listed below in a keyword search.

For example, the keyword search "[Charlemagne AND Sources](#)" brings up this title from our collection: *The Reign of Charlemagne: Documents on Carolingian Government and Administration* (call number: DC 73.A2 R39).

An even broader search would be "[France AND History AND Sources](#)."

Another example: "[Rome AND Correspondence](#)."

You may use a person's name or a geographical designation along with any of the keywords listed below. Be creative!

Subject Keywords to look for & use when searching library catalogs:

"sources"	"personal narratives"	"manuscripts"
"correspondence"	"letters"	"diaries"
"documents"	"courts"	"law"
"cases"		

Use these keywords... they really work!

- Beware of getting *too specific* or restrictive with your library catalog search strategy, because you might miss things.

Let's say I'm researching the business dealings of the Medici family during the late 15th century, particularly Lorenzo de' Medici (also called Lorenzo the Magnificent) and his heirs: Piero, Giuliano, and Giovanni (later Leo X).

I could search each family member individually by name, for example: "Lorenzo de' Medici, 1449-1492," "Leo X," etc.

But, I will probably *also* find books under: "Medici, House of"

And, I might find great primary sources in a book that simply has the subject heading: "Florence (Italy) -- History -- Sources."

In fact, I'll find this book: Florentine Merchants in the Age of the Medici; Letters and Documents from the Selfridge Collection of Medici Manuscripts, (call number: HF 3590.F6) using those less restrictive keywords - "Florence (Italy) -- History - Sources."



Local Library Catalogs:

- Begin with the Doherty [library catalog](http://library.stthom.edu), <http://library.stthom.edu> (but don't forget about other libraries)
- Use the [WorldCat](#) database accessible through the Doherty library web site. *WorldCat* is a massive composite database of library catalogs. It contains millions of bibliographic records in multiple languages. [WorldCat](#) contains any type of material cataloged by OCLC member libraries and reflects holdings information from libraries in 45 countries.

Note: You will likely want to request materials found on *WorldCat* through our inter-library loan service, so begin your research early. Leave yourself plenty of time to obtain needed materials. Speak with the librarians about inter-library loan options.

- [Rice](#) and [UH libraries](#) have ample collections including primary source materials. [Houston Public Library](#) specializes in local history sources. Discuss your options with the Reference librarians at Doherty library.



Doherty Library Contacts:

Reference desk phone 713-525-2188 • email reference@stthom.edu
Inter-Library Loan phone 713-525-6926 • email loans@stthom.edu