

The Digital Helen Keller Archive

Lesson Two: Primary and Secondary Sources

Before Teaching

Main Idea

A **primary source** is evidence of history. Whether it is an object, text, or recording, a primary source was created at the time a particular event occurred or was created by someone with firsthand knowledge of an event.

A **secondary source** synthesizes or analyzes primary source material. Typically, researchers produce secondary sources after an historical event or era. They discuss or interpret evidence found in primary sources. Examples are books, articles, and documentaries.

Overview

Using materials from the Helen Keller Archive, students learn to identify and use primary sources in their research and historical writing. Students differentiate between primary and secondary sources and critically examine the authorship, purpose, and historical context of multiple primary sources.

Learning Objectives

- Define and differentiate between primary and secondary sources.
 - Examine and analyze the contents of primary sources.
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Guiding Questions

- What is a primary source?
- What is a secondary source?
- Where do I find primary sources?
- How do I read a primary source?

Materials

- Laptop/Tablet/Computer
- Internet connection
- Projector or Smartboard (if available)
- Worksheets (provided, print for students)
- Pen/Pencil/Paper

Time

45 minutes

About the Helen Keller Archive

Historical Background

[From the Archive:](#)

The Helen Keller Archive at the American Foundation for the Blind (AFB) is the world's largest repository of materials about and by Helen Keller. Materials include correspondence, speeches, press clippings, scrapbooks, photographs, photograph albums, architectural drawings, audio recordings, audio-visual materials and artifacts.

The collection contains detailed biographical information about Helen Keller (1880-1968), as well as a fascinating record of over 80 years of social and political change worldwide. Keller was a feminist, a suffragist, a social activist, and a pacifist, as well as a prolific writer and published author. The AFB began collecting material by and about Keller in 1932, and the collection has only grown since then. Most importantly, the Helen Keller Archive is being made accessible to blind, deaf, deaf-blind, sighted and hearing audiences alike.

Resources

Screenshot of work record from the archive:
Metadata and information about the selected image

Metadata		Information about the selected image	
Information about this item			
Series	1: General Correspondence	Date of Original	December 9, 1943
Sub Series	2: Advocacy & Work	Format of Original Type	Typewritten letters and draft of letter
Box	36: Legislation to Travel: 1932	Person To	Barnett, M. R.; Barnett, M. Robert
Folder	1: Legislation: Federal - General	Person From	Keller, Helen; Keller, Helen A.; Keller, Helen Adams
Item No	16	Place From	USA - Connecticut - Westport
Language	English	Type	Letter
Format of Original	9 x 11 inches	Format of Digital	image/TIFF
Subject	Government - U.S. - legislation; Finances; Blindness - advocacy - employment	Date of Digital	June 8, 2015
Description	Correspondence between M. R. Barnett, NYC and Helen Keller, Westport, CT regarding tax bill H. R. 3687 on income taxes on the employed blind.	Publisher Digital	American Foundation for the Blind
Signature	Keller, Helen; Keller, Helen A.; Keller, Helen Adams	Provenance	American Foundation for the Blind, Helen Keller Archive
Folder Start Date	1927	Filename	HK01-02_B036_F01_016_002.tif
Folder End Date	1967	Rights	Prior written permission required to use any image from the digital collections of the American Foundation for the Blind.
Holding Institution	American Foundation for the Blind		
Contact Information	2 Penn Plaza, Suite 1102, New York, NY 10121, (212) 502-7600		

Websites

[Helen Keller Archive](https://www.afb.org/HelenKellerArchive) | <https://www.afb.org/HelenKellerArchive>

[American Foundation for the Blind](http://www.afb.org) | <http://www.afb.org>

AFB American Foundation[®]
for the Blind

Expanding possibilities for people with vision loss

Lesson

Part One: What is a Primary Source?

Ask and Discuss

- Does anyone keep a diary? Write texts? Take photos? Create art?
- If a historian in 100 years found your diary/emails/photos, what would they learn about your life? Family? School? Town?
- For example, in an archaeological dig, researchers might uncover your local landfill, including the empty toothpaste tube you threw out last week. Looking through an archive, a researcher might find my gradebook from this very year...including your last test score.
- These everyday products of your life are potentially primary sources. Historians use items like these from ten, a hundred, a thousand years ago to learn about the past.

Explain and Connect

A primary source...

- Was created in the past, specifically at the time being researched.
- But just being “old” does not make something a primary source.
- Has firsthand knowledge or other direct evidence of the era or subject under research.
- Has provenance. Provenance means that the time and/or place of the production of a document or artifact can be reasonably believed to be true and provable.
- Needs to be evaluated based on its creators (who made it) and historical context (when and how it exists).
- Is found in an archive, museum, library/bookstore, or maybe in your backpack, right now.
- Define archive for students if necessary. See the [Definitions FAQ sheet](#).
- Explain that if your texts and videos are preserved, for example in an archive, library, or museum, scholars in the future may use your work to write a history of the early twenty-first century.
- Look at your last text conversation/email thread/search history. What could it show a historian about life in the twenty-first century?

Compare sources side-by-side, using worksheet at the end of this lesson plan.

- Read sources as a class.
- What is similar about these two sources? Different?
- Both of these documents are about Helen Keller and her advocacy. One was written 100+ years later by a historian, and one was written by Helen herself.
 - The letter is a **primary** source.
 - The biography is a **secondary** source.

A secondary source...

- Was written after the time under research.
- Brings together primary source material to tell a larger story.
- Some sources can be either a primary or secondary source, depending on how it is used.
 - For example: if someone in the nineteenth century is writing about the seventeenth century, that source is a secondary source for the seventeenth century and a primary source for the nineteenth century.
- Is found in classrooms, libraries/bookstores, movies, or new media.

Brainstorm examples of primary and secondary sources.

Optional:

Which of the following are primary sources? Secondary? Both?

- Your history textbook
- A diary written in 1940
- Leonardo's The Last Supper
- A documentary on the life of Helen Keller
- Tax records
- A photograph of the attack on Pearl Harbor during World War II
- A musical about American history
- A history of the Roman Empire written in 1776
- Yesterday's newspaper

Part Two: How do I Use Primary Sources?

Demonstrate:

- Pull up the digital Helen Keller Archive.
- Explain that the class will be using primary sources found in the HKA, which collects documents and objects by and about Helen Keller.
- Navigate to primary source used in earlier exercise:
[Correspondence between M. R. Barnett, NYC and Helen Keller, Westport, CT regarding tax bill H. R. 3687 on income taxes on the employed blind.](#)
- Detail that this letter is preserved in material/physical format at the Helen Keller Archive facility.
- Let's find out more about this primary source:
 - Explain that a digital archive includes metadata/source information that will allow researchers to analyze and contextualize the source.
 - Highlight the Metadata section and explain the information available in metadata, including description, subject, date, original type, person to/from, place.
 - This metadata tells us the 5W1Hs of the primary source: who, what, when, where, why, and how.
- Highlight transcript section and explain that archivists and volunteers transcribe any text found in the document.
- Transcription is important because:
 - It helps us read unfamiliar handwriting or faded letters.
 - It helps people with visual impairment use text-to-speech technology to read documents.

Ask and Discuss

- To analyze a primary source, start with the basics: Who, what, when, where, why, and how.
- Who wrote this letter? When?
- To what is the letter responding?
- What does the author say about the topic under consideration? What alternatives do they propose?
- What names or terms in this letter are unfamiliar? What additional information would you need to more fully understand this letter?
- Based on this letter, what can we infer about the economic position of blind Americans in the 1940s?
- Let's refer back to the secondary source.
- Where does the author of the secondary source refer to the letter?

- How does she use the letter to prove a point? What is she trying to prove?
- What additional information does she provide to contextualize this letter?

OR

Activity

Students complete “Spotlight on Helen Keller” individually or in groups.

For Teachers

- “H. R.” is an abbreviation for House Resolution, a piece of legislation proposed by the House of Representatives.
- “H. R. 3687,” as referred to in this letter, is a revenue bill introduced in the House of Representatives in 1943. Among other things, the bill proposed a tax deduction for blind taxpayers.
- H. R. numbers are reused in each Congress. H. R. 3687 1943 is not the same as H. R. 3687 in 2004.
- “Federal insurance against blindness” refers to a policy proposal that would provide direct financial assistance to blind Americans, much like the disability insurance available through Social Security today.

This Lesson Meets Curriculum Standards

Common Core

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.1](#)

Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.2](#)

Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary of the source distinct from prior knowledge or opinions.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.6](#)

Identify aspects of a text that reveal an author's point of view or purpose (e.g., loaded language, inclusion or avoidance of particular facts).

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.6-8.9](#)

Analyze the relationship between a primary and secondary source on the same topic.

[CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.7.8](#)

Gather relevant information from multiple print and digital sources, using search terms effectively; assess the credibility and accuracy of each source; and quote or paraphrase the data and conclusions of others while avoiding plagiarism and following a standard format for citation.