Identifying Primary and Secondary Sources

The Michigan State University Archives & Historical Collections collects more than 150 years of MSU history. The collections in the MSU Archives contain mostly primary sources. Below are definitions of primary sources and secondary sources to help you tell them apart.

Primary Sources

A primary source provides direct or firsthand evidence about an event, object, person or work of art. Primary sources are made at the same time as the events and people described and have little or no degrees of separation between the document and its creator. Primary sources material can be written documents or material objects. Examples of primary sources include:

- personal correspondence and diaries
- speeches and oral histories
- audio and video recordings
- photographs and posters
- newspaper ads and stories
- laws and legislative hearings
- census or demographic records
- works of art and literature
- plant and animal specimens
- coins and tools

Secondary Sources

Secondary sources were created after the event by people who did not witness or participate in it themselves. Secondary sources are often based on primary sources, but the information in secondary sources has been interpreted, commented, analyzed or processed in such a way that it no longer conveys the freshness of the original. Examples of secondary sources include:

- history textbooks
- dictionaries
- encyclopedias
- interpretive journal articles
- book reviews