

Incorporating Primary and Secondary Sources

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Be sure if you do a great deal of primary research that it shows in your final project. It is good to have an impressive annotated bibliography that shows a balance between secondary material and primary sources. However, if the information you gathered in this research is not clearly incorporated into your project, that research effort is wasted. For example, if you are doing an exhibit and have read letters and diaries expressing the ideas of participants, then those voices should be on the exhibit. Include stirring quotations on the exhibit, and remember, direct quotes (primary sources) are not counted in your 500-word limit. It is usually much more powerful to let those who were part of the history tell the story in their own words in your project, whether is be performance, display, documentary or essay. On the other hand, do not simply use primary materials just because you have them. Don't use historical photographs in your display or media that may be neat, but are not really related to your thesis and the flow of your argument. You are using primary material to tell a story, and to support a thesis. Make sure that any material, primary or secondary, is part of your story, and helps to prove your conclusion.

Do not "pad" your bibliography with page after page of primary and secondary sources that are only indirectly related to your project. Buried somewhere in the middle is the heart of your research. A judge may give up on finding the key sources that helped you develop a thesis and come to your conclusion. Use the annotation to give weight and significance to your research. You need not include works that "got you started" but are not relevant to your final project. Begin your bibliography with your most important research: that show how you developed and support your thesis, were most "moving" and gave you the greatest empathy into the period, and gave you the greatest insight into understanding the past and its significance. In this way, judges will be reassured that your project is backed by solid and convincing historical research and interpretation. "More" is not necessarily "better." Many bibliographies are too long and list-like to be effective indicators of your research and historical thinking.

Be creative in pursuing primary sources. Read autobiographies for quotes. Look at the bibliographies of the secondary sources you are using for specific works to look for. Use the Internet and email to contact archives and different libraries. Anthologies or collections are often a good source – for example collections of letters and anthologies of speeches or documents.

Be very clear on the difference between a primary and secondary source. An interview with an historian is not a primary source if that person was not a witness to the event in question. Interviewing someone who was involved in the event, however, is a primary source. Similarly, a newspaper article from two years ago about WWII is not a primary source, it is a backward look by a secondary source. However, an article from a newspaper from the time period can be used as a primary source, to see how the news media at the time dealt with the issue or to see what people at the time were feeling in the editorial page. A common problem in History Day projects is students who use interviews and newspaper articles as primary sources without making that distinction.

You need a blend of both kinds of research for a strong, interesting and persuasive project. Secondary material helps you to understand the issues and to formulate opinions regarding causes and significance. Working with primary material then helps to establish an even deeper understanding and connection to the people and events. At the end of this journey, you will have discovered the joy of an

historian, the excitement of understanding another people and another time. You will have had the opportunity to come to your own conclusions and to present them to others. You will have contributed to the continual task of better understanding where we have come from and where we are going in this unfolding human story.