

Media Literacy Mini-Lesson #1

PRIMARY SOURCES

How do journalists accurately describe important events to readers? How do historians find the best information about what those events were actually like? One answer to both questions is that they rely on **primary sources**.

A PRIMARY SOURCE IS...



● **A first-hand account from a key moment or event**

● **A story or evidence created or gathered by the people who were at the scene of an event**



Primary sources can take many forms...

such as an interview with people who experienced the event, a photograph, a letter, a film, a text message or cell phone video, a diary entry, or a recording of a speech that help capture a key moment as it happened.

Using multiple sources:

Just because something is a primary source doesn't mean it's necessarily accurate or true all by itself. After all, journalists might interview witnesses who might not have seen or heard everything at an event or incident.



Here is a classic example: Many Titanic survivors said they were on "the last lifeboat." They were just on the last lifeboat that they could see. Journalists and historians seek multiple sources to try and confirm exactly what happened.



Consider perspective:

All witnesses may have a particular perspective or bias. For instance, people who fought in a battle might think their side was heroic while the other fighters were cowardly or cruel.

Check your sources:

Primary sources are often accompanied by a caption which provides bibliographic information like the name and year of publication. What other information may help you determine if it is a primary source? Take a look at the caption in the example on the next page!



Read the excerpt by Thomas Morris Chester on the next page and answer the following questions about what makes it a primary source. Share your responses with a peer in-person or online.

The following source was written by Thomas Morris Chester, a Black journalist whose parents had been enslaved. Chester wrote for the *Philadelphia Press* during the Civil War. In this excerpt, Chester describes what he heard and saw during the surrender of Richmond, Virginia, which was the capital of the Confederacy.

Seated in the Speaker's chair, so long dedicated to treason, but in the future to be consecrated to loyalty, I hasten to give a rapid sketch of the incidents which have occurred since my last despatch.

...

The pious old Negroes, male and female, indulged in such expressions: "You've come at last"; "We've been looking for you these many days"; "Jesus has opened the way"; "God Bless"; "I've not seen that old flag for four years." "Have you come to stay?"; "Thank God", and similar expressions of exultation (joy). The soldiers, black and white, received these assurances, of loyalty as evidences of the [patriotism] of an oppressed people, which a military despotism (dictatorship) has not been able to crush."

"The Fall of Richmond - Hall of Congress - Richmond, April 4, 1865." *Thomas Morris Chester: Black Civil War Correspondent: His Dispatches from the Virginia Front.* R.J.M. Blackett. Louisiana State University Press, 1989.

Describe what is happening in the excerpt. What did you notice or wonder about?

What makes the source a primary source?

What important information does Chester provide to readers in 1865 that might help them understand the event?