

Understanding Primary & Secondary Sources

Written records provide us with useful information about historical events, everyday life, and the beliefs of different peoples. Historians use two types of written records: primary sources and secondary sources.

Primary sources provide useful information about historical events. The oral tradition of the indigenous peoples of North America and written accounts of European explorers/settlers, etc. are both examples of primary sources.

Primary sources present us with some potential strengths and weaknesses:

- **Strength:** they provide direction information on the who, what, where, when, why and how of an event
- **Strength:** they indicate the social and economic status of the speaker/author
- **Strength:** they offer the reader/listener insight into the emotional state of the speaker/author

- **Weakness:** they are not objective sources of information precisely because of the role emotion plays in the creation of a story or narrative
- **Weakness:** the identity and motivation of the author/speaker might be unclear
- **Weakness:** words and phrases found in the primary source might change over time so people in the present cannot properly understand them
- **Weakness:** documents/stories need to be evaluated using other forms of evidence

Despite the potential drawbacks of relying on primary sources, using older sources provides the obvious advantage of being the next best thing to directly witnessing an event oneself; moreover, primary sources always provide people in the present with a glimpse into the thinking and worldview of the peoples who created them.

Secondary sources are created by people who did not experience something first-hand or participate in the events being described. Books and journals which are the product of the research of historians are excellent examples of secondary sources. The best or most reliable secondary sources are those created the most recently. For example, ten years after the end of World War I historians argued Germany was largely responsible for the outbreak of the war; however, by the 1960s and 70s new information came to light, e.g. files, letters, secret diplomatic dispatches previously unavailable, etc. challenging the original narrative, i.e. no single nation was responsible for the outbreak of the Great War rather it was the product of a series of political, social and economic forces. For this reason the more current the scholarship (when it comes to secondary sources) the better.

Procedure:

- 1). Read the introduction as a whole class (see above).
- 2). In small groups, read the various primary and secondary accounts (see next page).
- 3). Then as a group just discuss—*do not write anything*—the following questions.

a. Read the sources to find out what information is given. a). According to Source A, what is the ultimate end or purpose of creation? b). Read Source C: why did Cartier describe Labrador as the “land God gave to Cain”?

b. Compare the two sources. a). Based on Sources A and B: what ideas or notions do the two accounts share in common? b). Comparing Sources C and D, what initial assumptions did Europeans and First Nations peoples make about one another?

c. Evaluate the reliability of each source. a). Based on Sources A and B: in your opinion, which origin story is the more reliable explanation for how the earth actually came to be created? b). Which type of primary source is the more reliable—a written one (Source C) or an oral one (Source D)? Explain.

- 4). Then individually compose an answer (minimum 100 words in length) to the question below using *Google Docs*. In your answer, ensure you make direct reference to the sources. Submit your completed response and share it with your

teacher (rdelainey@lcbi.sk.ca).

d. Use the sources to draw conclusions. Pretend you are producing your own history text (or second source). You must incorporate all four primary sources into your text. In a paragraph long answer, explain how you accomplish this. In your answer, consider making reference to the strengths and weaknesses of primary sources listed above.

SOURCE A: *Creation Story of the Yakima First Nation from Coteekun, the son of a native-chief*

In the beginning of the world, all was water. Whee-me-me-ah, the Great Chief Above, lived in the sky, above the water, all alone. When he decided to make the world, he went down to the shallow places and began to throw up great handfuls of mud. Thus he made the land. We do not know this by ourselves we were told it by our fathers and grandfathers, who learned it from their fathers and grandfathers. We were told the Great Chief Above made many mountains.... Someday the Great Chief above will overturn those mountains and rocks. Then the spirits that once lived in the bones buried there will go back into them. Now, those spirits live in the tops of the mountains, watching their children on the earth and waiting for the great change which is to come....

SOURCE B: *Creation Story of the Israelites (found in the Book of Genesis (1:1-9))*

In the beginning, when God created the universe, the earth was formless and desolate. The raging ocean that covered everything was engulfed in total darkness, and the Spirit of God was moving over the water. Then God commanded, "Let there be light"—and light appeared. God was pleased with what he saw. Then he separated the light from the darkness, and he named the light "Day" and the darkness "Night." Evening passed and morning came—that was the first day.

Then God commanded, "Let there be a dome to divide the water and to keep it in two separate places"—and it was done. So God made a dome, and it separated the water under it from the water above it. He named the dome "Sky." Evening passed and morning came—that was the second day.

Then God commanded, "Let the water below the sky come together in one place, so that the land will appear"—and it was done. He named the land "Earth," and the water had come together he named "Sea." And God was pleased with what he saw. Then he commanded, "Let the earth produce all kinds of plants, those that bear grain and those that bear fruit"—and it was done. So the earth produced all kinds of plants, and God was pleased with what he saw. Evening passed and morning came—that was the third day.

SOURCE C: *Journal of 1534 by Jacques Cartier*

I am rather inclined to believe that this is the land [Labrador] God gave to Cain. There are people on this coast, whose bodies are fairly well formed, but they are wild and save folk. As soon as they saw us they began making signs that they had come to barter with us and held up skins of small value, with which they clothe themselves. We likewise made signs to them that we wished them no harm and sent two men ashore to offer them some knives and other iron goods, and a red cap to give to their chief. They bartered all they had to such an extent that all went back naked without anything on them; and they made signs to us that they would return on the morrow with more skins.

SOURCE D: *Squamish First Nation account of first-encounter with John Cabot*

The people did not know what it was. At first they believed that the ship was a floating island with sticks growing on it, and cobwebs were hanging from the sticks. As they approached this monstrous thing they could see that it was a canoe of tremendous size. Then as they rested their paddles and looked at this great canoe, they saw a man on-board. He was walking on the deck. They thought he was dead—walking; that he was from the spirit world, and that he was carrying his coffin on his back. You must understand that this man had a big beard, which was something new to the people, and above this great mass of black beard his face was white. Now, the only pale faces the people had ever seen were on dead men.