What is a primary source?

Primary sources are firsthand accounts of events or conditions during a particular period, often recorded contemporaneously by participants or observers.

Primary sources are written in the language of the time, not necessarily the language we use now. Choose your search terms wisely, or else you might miss out on the perfect source.

Written documents:
- Diaries and journals
- Blogs
- Letters (correspondence)
- Speeches and sermons
- Manuscripts
- Notes (and other written materials describing experienced or observed events)
- Autobiographies and memoirs describing experienced or observed events (in hindsight)
- Newspaper articles
- Maps

Multimedia sources:
- Photographs, films, videos
- News broadcasts and transcripts
- Audio recordings documenting contemporary events
- Music, television shows, advertisements

Physical artifacts:
- Art objects
- Costumes
- Buildings, monuments, etc.
- Public opinion polls, television shows, movies, music, best-sellers, advertisements - anything that provides a cultural, psychological, or sociological snapshot of a certain time period

A few things to keep in mind when looking for and working with primary sources:

- **Context** - In what context was the creator of this source working? What might have influenced them?
  - *For example:* if you've found one good newspaper article, what was on the cover of the newspaper that day? What were the advertisements?
- **Audience** - Who is the intended audience for this source?
- **Format** - Consider how the format you've found the document in might impact your assessment and analysis.
  - *For example:* A scanned image of a document illustrates what the original document looked like (including handwriting, marginalia, etc.). This might give you a different perspective on the document than a transcription, in which the document is reduced to its text.