

Below are the survey questions respondents were asked.

- could you tell me about your past (and present) experiences using primary sources?
- how did you find those experiences?
- item what were the main challenges you faced in those types of exercises?
- how/where did you learn to use primary sources?

Respondent 1

"I like using primary sources to be honest, I think they give me a better perspective of a certain time or place..

I have used newspaper articles but find that using them make me want to find out who wrote it, who was the target audience, and who benefits.. Editors always have an agenda to sell papers.

Images i.e. Posters, photographs, and cartoons are more immediate I think.. maybe because I have a visual impairment, they are my preference.. You don't have to know how to read when looking at a picture and images are a direct way of getting a point across.

I found using oral histories to be more realistic, as I could hear the emotions in people's voices.

I think my main challenges using sources were not knowing where to look for what I wanted.. I personally did a course in college on media, and that was when I understood what primary and secondary sources were.

As a politics student myself, I think that looking at primary sources make me question a lot of things that I just used to take for granted.

The cartoons in our slides of Hitler and Stalin just makes me think about the people that they sort of messages were meant for.. who saw them, what did they think, did they believe them, that sort of thing.?

I think I look at everything critically since the referendum in 2014.. but, yeah looking critically at sources is part and package for politics.. My first two year were joint with history and politics but dropped history and stuck with politics.. There is so much happening in these strange times."

Respondent 2

"In terms of primary sources, I have not used them as much as I would have imagined, when I have used them it has always been when a lecturer has directed me towards them for a piece of work. I would say that knowing how to use them correctly has been a roller-coaster in terms of having little guidance and just self teaching. And some of the main challenges have been access-not having the credentials or physical access. More so during dissertation research but also in previous years."

Respondent 3

"Your dissertation topic sounds very intriguing! For me it's highly topical as I just this afternoon had a conversation w/my RESH 2 supervisor about the need to seriously sharpen my critical thinking skills to do well at uni in Scotland. (Most of my higher education in the states was more focused on rote memorisation, which requires much less grey matter involvement.)

Anyhoo...here are some thoughts regarding your questions:

I have used primary sources in several assessments at U of G.

My first experience using primary sources at U of G was an assignment which had to be written based on a primary resource chosen from a very large list of primary sources offered by the tutor. It was very easy using those primary sources as the sources were all pre-defined and readily available. As I recall it, we were told the assignment was a 'primary source' assignment. We were given explicit instructions on what and why we were to utilise the primary sources, so everything was spelled out for us in black and white. It's doubtful I would have chosen many of the sources which were offered had they not been part of the assignment, so my horizons were broadened in that sense. I vaguely recall feeling a *little* intimidated by the fact that the sources were primary, but, of course, that was needless. Who knew?

I also had an assignment where I happened across primary sources in the form of a group of people who had lived through the topic about which I was writing. That was an unexpected, but very serendipitous situation. Having information 'straight from the horse's mouth', as it were, was invaluable and most certainly gave me a far better understanding of my topic than just reading about it. I was at a Library researching local history when the Librarian introduced me to a group who happened to be meeting while I was there, so I wasn't as prepared as I could have been had I known about them in advance, but the conversations ended up being quite a bit more organic than they otherwise might have been, so the people involved probably felt more at ease. They gave, off-the-cuff answers to my casually asked questions. This could be viewed as a good thing or a bad thing depending on who you talk to. In this case, the challenges included making people feel comfortable around a stranger who was asking some quite personal questions and getting as much information as I could in a fairly short period of time.

Another assignment had a group of us take walking tours together around specified areas in the greater Glasgow area to collect primary sources in any form in which we were able. That mostly took the form of pictures of the various sites we visited over the course of our tour and our own notes about those sites. That was also insightful and, again, seeing sites and people in the flesh allowed a greater degree of understanding than just reading had done. Challenges included the transport issues, the weather (ha!) and making sure the information provided for each site was correct.

I've utilised transcripts of recorded interviews for a couple of assignments. The interviews took place many years after occurrences of actual events, but general themes became apparent whether or not some memories were crystal clear.

For me, RESH 1 was slightly different. None of the topics being offered were of particular interest to me, so I thought that might have been a challenge. As it turned out, the challenges had more to do with syncing styles of four different people. Thankfully, the group I was in consisted of mostly responsible people, so it all worked out in the end. The challenges with the primary sources themselves were GDPR issues, and consequently issues around availability. Our supervisor worked around that by having all of the pages of each document digitised except the pages with personally identifying information. That led to timing issues as the U of G Library had other priorities, but we ultimately received most of what we needed. The pages which held the offending information also held other information on it, so we missed out on some important information that we could have gotten had circumstances been different. Other challenges were reading the documents, which were surveys with several questions left open ended. The survey responses were handwritten, and sometimes difficult to decipher. As it turned out, the topic was extremely interesting and I have taken another course this term which connects to the topic on multiple occasions.

Even though I had a topic chosen for my dissertation this past January and had already met with a supervisor, I decided NOT to undertake a dissertation. The main reason I chose not to undertake a dissertation was because I would have been sending surveys to primary schools and I felt that with the precarious situation surrounding education just now it would be asking too much of school teachers and/or administrators to take on more work in the form of a survey. At the time, I didn't even know if schools would be operating, so it was possible that my dissertation would have been rubbish due to lack of available primary sources.

Overall, my experiences using primary resources have been positive and as previously mentioned, I have benefitted immensely from having access to primary sources. One thing I would say is that in my experience, when other people are present during an interview or while filling in surveys, responses can be different to what can be verified by factual records, so that should be taken into account. Also, opinions are subjective and memories can fail, but patterns can be found after accounting for outliers.

[after a probe on primary sources and critical thinking]

primary sources have help make connections between different aspects of history (e.g. social, civic, political, economic w/real life examples.

Seeing and hearing first-hand accounts help me form clearer ideas about topics.

Primary sources also give me another angle to examine a topic for a more well-rounded view.

[so you might adapt your argument according to what's in a source, then?]

Definitely! that's exactly what I meant!"

Respondent 4

"Past experience using sources: Frustratingly difficult to pin down something that you know must be there. Discovering snippets of information and not having clear signposting to where the other bits are. Difficulty in reading written manuscripts. Knowing that sources are in a particular place and not having access to them (physically due to covid or because of cost of travel), or digitally because of cost to have them copied/photographed and sent to you.

Main challenges are similar to above. Also, in how to use sources. I can reference something from an archive or an old newspaper. How do I reference a photograph or a building or any object?

Learning to use sources: one project in 1st or second year about objects. An introduction to the special collections in year 3. Most important for me has been the history hackathons."

\emph{Respondent 5}

"you have to find out where the sources actually are. you have to learn to read the things behind the words, the context, as opposed to the actual words. you also need time and resilience. you also need to know when is enough, how to prioritise. and find a good professor who loves you. communication, able to convince others - this information isn't necessarily publicly available, you have to convince people to let you see it

say a company's price to book ratio is 2 - what does it mean? or say for a general's memo, don't just think about what he said, think about what he didn't say. and compare what they say to what the literature says, ie to spot changes of a person's opinion over time. but it's difficult, because you need to know this thing inside out. and if you don't, you need to understand where to go to find out. this type of prep work, i guess. work behind the content. it's similar if you're looking at secondary sources - why did they say that? like a fucking detective i guess is the best way to say it"

Respondent 6

"sources are useful to provide some flavour shall we say to the paper. Real life examples and testimonies help paint a picture and compliment secondary sources to further elucidate a point (idk if that answer the first question)

The first thing I think of with challenges for primary sources were from RESH when half that shit was in old time Spanish and not translated. So I suppose that primary sources are by definition in their original form can provide inherent challenges. Moreover, a primary source can give an account of an individual but not necessarily a group as a whole which is something to think about I suppose

the last bullet point I feel like every ESH classs has some primary project to try and teach you how to use them but my essays in first and second year sucked a lot so it's not like it

clicked right away and am still learning. I guess just reading a bunch of published work helps show how to write a paper”

Respondent 7

Throughout my degree, in particular ESH 2B and RESH 1, I have encountered the use of various primary sources. With regards to ESH 2B, we had to look at oral testimonies as well as look at the theory of oral history. I found using oral testimonies very interesting but it wasn't without its issues. With regards to RESH 1, it has been a mixture of oral testimonies, letters and leaflets related to the topic that we are researching. Other primary sources that I've used – during the course of my degree - have been looking at diary extracts, chronicles and letters dated as close to the time period in which we were studying. The latter was much more prevalent in both my History Level 1 and Level 2 courses – my Honours History modules start in semester 2 of this year.

I have encountered a few issues, with particular regard to use of oral testimony as a primary source. Certain parts of information had been omitted so this left the analysis open to some form of interpretation. This had problems within itself, which included the thought of misinterpreting both the interviewer and the interviewee. Another issue was the use of certain questions, some of which could be considered as quite leading and the interviewee might have been answering it to fit the interviewer's interpretation of said event. With regards to briefly using chronicles, evidence of bias was clear in some of them and these had to be approached with a degree of caution when using them.

Since Level 1, in both ESH and History, there was large emphasis on theories behind uses of certain primary sources. In my compulsory Honours History module, we study both historical theory and are also given practical primary source research skills to assist us when using certain primary sources in our essays, dissertation etc. I find this to be very valuable experience and has been very helpful in analysing primary sources in our chosen topic for RESH 1. In History 2A, we were taught in seminars how to handle and how to be careful in our approach to primary sources. I did a 5-minute presentation on a personal testimony primary source and also linked it back to oral history theory. In ESH 2B, we were given an entire lecture and seminar on oral history to assist us in approaching oral testimonies for our ESH 2B project. Again, this was very valuable and now has assisted me in my Honours ESH modules as well it will assist in my upcoming Honours History modules and, in the near future, my dissertation also.”

Respondent 8

“how did you find those experiences using sources?

It was a big leap coming in to Uni learning how to reliably source information. Knowing how to find accurate, academic sources that you can trust is not a straightforward as I first thought and it's a skill that took time to improve. Overall I've enjoyed using sources in my work, in particular working with primary source material has been interesting because putting things in their historic context and being able to justify that with contemporary information makes for a more robust argument I think. In terms of critical thinking I would say the biggest challenge with using primary sources is being able to articulate the relevant

information as concisely as possible, truly understanding what the core important points of each are.

what were/have been your main challenges with using sources?

I think just learning what is actually useful/relevant to the topic you are working on. There's normally a wealth of sources you 'can' use but knowing how to select those which form the most compelling argument is a different prospect. Another issue was the initial search, finding the right collections or databases when you don't even know where to start can be daunting.

how did you think you even learned how to use sources correctly in the first place?

Going to as many workshops as you feel necessary would be my advice here. I think if I'm being honest I had an idea before coming to Uni that you can just rock up at the library and sit surrounded by dusty old books absorbing all this information but it is vital to use the professionals in the library and teaching staff to understand what you are actually looking for otherwise you can just get lost in information. Trial and error, and actually learning from early feedback, while obvious sounding, is also important. Listen to what the lecturers are telling you after you've presented an argument with primary sources and adjust accordingly."