

## Engaging Undergraduates with Primary Resources

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Primary sources are often used by graduate students and advanced researchers, but can be compelling teaching tools for undergraduates as well. Visiting archives and special collections departments can be intimidating for students, but by introducing them to primary source materials in the classroom, modelling research methods, and having them work in groups, students can become more comfortable working with different types of information sources, improve their research skills, and benefit from interacting with unique and engaging source materials. Digitization has expanded access to primary sources, making it easier and more convenient to include this material into your teaching, from slides to assignments. This document describes some ways you can introduce undergraduate students to primary sources and expand their understanding of research.

### ***What are primary sources?***

Primary sources are documents that were created during the period the researcher is studying. This includes not only traditional paper documents, such as letters, diaries, news articles, and government records, but also other sources of information like films, photographs, television footage, recipes, advertisements, political cartoons, recorded talks, and even household objects.

### ***Why use primary sources?***

Research has consistently shown gains in student achievement when primary sources are integrated into the curriculum (Fry, 2010). A three year study developed by a research team at the Brooklyn Historical Society found that undergraduate students that took part in a class program that included structured pedagogical sessions centered around primary source material performed better in their courses overall than those that did not, and developed critical and analytical research skills (Anderson et al.). The students in the study reported that hands-on access to the primary sources had a profound effect on them, and that the course content they studied became much more relevant through interaction with the primary sources (Anderson et al.).

Interaction with primary sources engages student researchers, and allows them to develop an understanding of the time period in question. Primary source research also provides students with an opportunity to take an active role in learning. They are required to use analytical thinking and interpretation skills to fill in contextual information that may be missing, and to tie theoretical or generalized historical concepts to actual events, people, or experiences (Library of Congress). Students have the opportunity to draw their own conclusions, recognize contradictions, and realize how sources can be used, in and out of context, to support different, sometimes conflicting, theories.

### ***How to Integrate Primary Sources Into Coursework***

Here are some ideas for integrating primary sources into your courses:

- Use primary documents as points for discussion at the beginning of lessons or as a way to review following a unit of study.
- Use primary documents as a starting point for self-directed research and analysis, or as source material for students to create exhibitions, posters, creative writing, or multimedia presentations.

- Have students work in groups with the materials to encourage collaboration, insight sharing, and cooperative learning.
- After an introduction to primary source research, include an assignment requiring students to locate further primary documents on a topic. This can help improve their research skills, particularly in identifying reliable sources.
- When assigning a research paper, include a requirement for the citation of one or more primary sources.
- Include conflicting sources for comparison. Ask students to compare and contrast records created from different sides of a historical situation.
- Have students evaluate a record themselves. Use analysis worksheets (such as [these worksheets provided by the National Archives](#)), or provide questions to guide critical analysis, which may include:
  - What is the document?
  - Who created it?
  - What was its original purpose?
  - Where was it created?
  - What kind of information or evidence does it contain?
  - What does the format say about the document?
  - Why and how was the document preserved?
  - What other documents or information might give this further context?
  - How does the information in the document align with/contradict other documents or secondary sources?
  - What conclusions can be drawn based on the document?
  - What further research is necessary to form conclusions?
- Design tailored, small-group discussions based on students' initial findings and require students to provide specific evidence from the document to illustrate their points.
- Encourage students to follow up with further research on primary sources they find themselves.

### ***Getting Started with Primary Sources***

To help ease undergraduates into working with primary sources, consider the following tips:

- Always begin by defining primary sources and differentiating them from secondary sources.
- Provide students with clear learning objectives for the use of primary sources.
- Provide students with related secondary source material to help develop context.
- Select a few individual documents to examine, ensuring they are relevant to the course material. Model the process of [document analysis](#) for students.
- Provide some introductory information about the materials: Where are they located? How are they arranged? How can students search for them? How do they cite them?
- If visiting an archive or special collection and using original documents (rather than reproductions or digitized copies), review handling guidelines carefully prior to the class.

### ***Sample assignments at Ryerson***

Looking for some inspiration? Here are a few undergraduate assignments that Ryerson faculty created using primary source material in Ryerson's Archives & Special Collections:

## Digital Exhibitions Assignment

Students in Professor Lorraine Janzen Kooistra's Advanced Research Methods class examine popular culture through different historical periods by consulting primary sources from the time, including a run of the [Yellow Book](#) and the [Canadian Whites Comic Book Collection](#), to create an online exhibition that can be included in their resumes or portfolios.

## Image Research in Architecture

Architecture and urban planning students studying the history of building in Toronto have conducted image research using photographs from the [Canadian Architect](#) collection, taken for publication in the journal from 1955-1990. These projects resulted in building histories, research papers, and a feature exhibition.

## History of photography through images, text, and objects

Students studying the history of photography in classes taught by Sara Knelman and Christopher Manson spend a class learning about the development of different photographic formats and processes through a combination of prior readings, lecture, and interaction with historical photographs, 19th and early 20th century cameras, period advertisements, amateur photography journals and how-to guides.

## *Resources for teaching with primary sources*

Depending on what you teach, there are a multitude of primary sources available for use, both at Ryerson, in Toronto, and across the world.

## Primary Source Resources at Ryerson

1. **[Ryerson Library Archives and Special Collections](#)**: The Archives contains a broad range of primary source materials related to the history and development of Ryerson University. Special Collections was established to help support the learning and teaching needs and facilitate the scholarly, research and creative activities of the Ryerson community by acquiring and preserving rare books, published material, photography, film and cultural history objects. We can provide access to these materials to you and your students through activities held in our classroom space, by providing primary source material to be integrated into course readings and assignments, and by working with instructors to create programs that meet the needs of their specific class. Collections of interest in Special Collections include:
  - a. **[Canadian Architect Magazine Fonds](#)**: The archive contains thousands of negatives and photographs taken for publication in Canadian Architect magazine, which reviewed and documented both public and private structures, including churches, homes, businesses, airports, government offices and public spaces. The subjects of the photographs are generally modern Canadian structures, but images of some international sites and early 20th century Canadian buildings can be found in the collection as well.
  - b. **[Leniniana Collection](#)**: The collection consists of more than 800 items featuring the image of Vladimir Ilych Lenin, the founder of the Soviet Union. There is a variety of media, including paper, textile, bronze, alloy, gold, clay, wood, porcelain, stone as well as books, posters, postcards, and 35mm black and white film. The collection was assembled between 1989 and 2003 in Moscow, Leningrad, Kiev, Vilnius and Kaliningrad. The items in the collection have been arranged in the following series: Documentary Films, Posters, Postcards, Books and Periodicals, Records, Pins,

Bookplates, Paintings, Rugs and Embroidery, Postage Stamps, Notes, Coins and Commemorative Medals, Sculptures, Reliefs, Flags.

- c. **[Kodak Canada Corporate Archives and Heritage Collection](#)**: The Kodak Canada collection contains records and artifacts from the Kodak Heights manufacturing facility in Toronto, as well as the historical collection belonging to the Kodak Heritage Collection Museum. The collection consists of photographs, negatives, advertising records, magazines, pamphlets, daily record books, recipe books, cameras and other photographic equipment produced by Kodak Canada Inc., or other Kodak plants around the world. The collection includes a small selection of financial records, blueprints for Kodak facilities in Canada, and other corporate ephemera, as well as photographs of events, buildings and individual employees that illustrate the social life of the company.
  - d. **[Robert Hackborn Fonds](#)**: The Robert Hackborn fonds contain the records that Mr. Hackborn generated during the course of his television production career at the CBC from 1955 until his retirement in 1993. The research value is significant as it relates to the history of Canadian television production, including photographic and textual documentation of the earliest stages of the show development process for the important children's television programs Mr. Dressup, Mr. Rogers Neighbourhood, and Jim Henson's Fraggle Rock (including images of, and correspondence with Mr. Henson). The fonds also includes a large collection of photographs documenting the processes of working on a television set.
2. **[Ryerson Image Centre](#)**: This centre for research, teaching and exhibition of photography at Ryerson features three galleries and a media wall. The Peter Higdon Research Centre is available by appointment to the Ryerson community and the public from Monday to Friday and contains historical and fine art photographs, the Black Star photojournalism collection, and several photographer archives.
  3. **[Fashion Research Collection](#)**: The Ryerson University Fashion Research Collection was founded in 1981 by Professor Emeritus Kathy Cleaver and contains several thousand donated garments and accessories dating back to the latter part of the nineteenth century. Primarily comprised of women's wear, the collection also includes selected items of children's and men's wear. The collection includes many examples from Canadian designers and retailers, as well as international designers such as Christian Dior, Valentino, and Balenciaga. The collection is located in the School of Fashion at Ryerson. While it is not open to drop in visits, undergraduate and graduate students, faculty and visiting researchers may request research appointments.

## Local Resources for Primary Source Research

1. **[Anglican Church of Canada Diocese of Toronto Archives](#)**: The archive preserves non-current parish records, including baptism, marriage and burial records, proof of status for legal purposes as well as genealogical purposes and parish history files, including photographs and architectural drawings. The archives is open to the public two days a week for research appointments.
2. **[The Archives of Ontario](#)**: The second largest archive in Canada, the Archives of Ontario incorporates information from government bodies, private companies, and individual citizens. Records range from as early as the late 1500's to the present and include photographs, maps, architectural drawings, films and sound recordings. Resources for teaching include online lesson plans and resources, research guides, databases and genealogical research guides.

3. **[Archives of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Toronto](#)**: The Archives of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Toronto (ARCAT) collects, preserves and makes available for research the official records of the Archdiocese of Toronto and those ancillary records which reflect the work of the Church within the Archdiocese. Primary source material dated prior to 1961 is open to researchers. Confidential or private records, and unprocessed materials are closed. Public may visit by appointment only.
4. **[Canadian Lesbian + Gay Archives](#)**: The Canadian Lesbian and Gay Archives (CLGA) is the largest independent LGBTQ+ archives in the world. With a focus on Canadian content, the CLGA acquires, preserves and provides public access to information and archival materials in any medium. Research can be done onsite for a small research fee, or online through digital exhibitions.
5. **[The City of Toronto Archives](#)**: The municipal archives for the city of Toronto, holding government and non-government records from government bodies, private companies, and individual citizens. The Archives holds over one million photographs, in addition to maps, architectural drawings, and plans. The collection is searchable through an [online database](#) and the reading room is open Monday to Saturday. A bookable classroom space in the archives space is forthcoming in early 2017.
6. **[Multicultural History Society of Ontario](#)**: Established in 1976, the Multicultural History Society of Ontario collects, preserves, and makes available irreplaceable records of our histories of migration and ethnicity. It undertakes educational programming to increase appreciation of the importance of diversity to the development and ongoing vitality of Ontario and Canada. The society has participated in several projects making primary source materials [available online](#). Collections include oral histories, ethnic newspapers, historical photographs and textual records. The archives can be accessed by appointment.
7. **[Ontario Jewish Archives](#)**: Established in 1973, the Ontario Jewish Archives preserves and makes available documentary sources related to Ontario's Jewish community. The Archives contain over 5,000 cubic feet of textual records; 60,000 historic photographs documenting Jewish life across Ontario; over 300 oral histories; over 300 films dating from the 1920s until the present; over 1,500 blueprints and architectural drawings created by Ontario's most notable Jewish architects; hundreds of artifacts; unpublished histories; and Jewish newspapers in Yiddish, Hebrew, and English. Collections are available for research through their [online database](#) or in person by appointment.
8. **[Royal Ontario Museum Libraries and Archives](#)**: Two libraries and the Museum Archives, with a collections focus of historical documents relating to the Museum, including manuscripts and photographs, are open to the public Monday to Friday for non-circulating access to materials. As part of the University of Toronto Library system, the ROM library holdings can be found through the University of Toronto online catalogue.
9. **[Toronto Reference Library](#)**: The non-circulating collection at the Reference Library includes not only books, but specialised collections such as the Toronto Star Photograph Archive, the [Arthur Conan Doyle Collection](#), [Picture Collection](#), [Map Collection](#), [Genealogy](#), and the [Baldwin Collection of Canadiana](#). Open 7 days a week, all collections are accessible to the public.

## Online Resources for Teaching with Primary Sources

1. **[Society of American Archivists: Teaching with Primary Sources Zotero Group](#)**: Developed and maintained by the Reference, Access, and Outreach Section of the Society of American

Archivists, this bibliography compiles resources focusing on the use of primary sources in elementary, secondary, and collegiate classrooms. Works included offer theoretical and practical information on using primary sources as pedagogical resources and how archivists can assist with maximizing student learning.

2. **[DocsTeach from the National Archives](#)**: This site provides resources and tools to engage students in historical research. Instructors can select from thousands of digitized primary sources and introduce students to existing activities, developed in adherence to Bloom's Taxonomy and National History Standards, or create their own using online tools (with a free account).
3. **[Great Unsolved Mysteries in Canadian History: Key Concepts in Historical Thinking](#)**: This project from Canadian Heritage and the University of Victoria, which provides material for teaching historical methods in Canadian history, includes an introduction to using primary source documents, and includes exercises and research questions students can engage with in the classroom to develop an understanding of the importance of primary source documents in historical research.
4. **[TeachArchives.org](#)** is an innovative resource for teachers, administrators, librarians, archivists, and museum educators. It offers sample exercises and informative articles based on a new approach to teaching in the archives. TeachArchives.org is the result of Students and Faculty in the Archives (SAFA), a three-year grant at Brooklyn Historical Society (BHS) which partnered with 18 faculty at 3 colleges within walking distance of the archives: Long Island University Brooklyn, New York City College of Technology (City Tech), and Saint Francis College.
5. **[History Matters](#)**: A website designed for teaching with history with primary sources. While focused on US history, it includes a useful section on [making sense of evidence](#) in which scholars outline how to approach interpreting different types of primary sources, including maps, data, films, and photographs.

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