

Beyond Primary and Secondary Sources

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Like most historians who teach first-year courses, I confront the annual challenge of explaining the difference between primary and secondary sources. It's a slippery beast for a distinction so simple, and so core to historical practice. Is that down to my limitations as a teacher, I've wondered while watching students struggle, or does the distinction's apparent simplicity belie the complexities baked into it? Surely some of the former is to blame, but I've become convinced that the difficulty owes much to the latter. Once students absorb the primary-secondary distinction, it tends to fade into the background of classroom discussions. Perhaps, though, we might better serve our students by dragging its nettlesome complexities into the light earlier and more often.

Good introductory texts on historical method complicate the distinction thoroughly and usefully. Daniel Tosh's *The Pursuit of History*, for instance, gives the example of Thomas Babington Macaulay's *The History of England*, which can be both a secondary ur-history, and a primary window into Victorian political and intellectual life. I took Tosh's lesson to heart when I first started teaching historical methods; I now believe that such qualifications don't go far enough.

This is partly because beginning history students are easily misled by historians' offhand way of discussing the primary-secondary distinction as though it differentiates between types of sources. But it doesn't—not really. When we classify sources, we are more properly identifying (or trying to) the different ways sources relate to arguments. Broadly speaking, secondary sources *motivate* and *situate* arguments, whereas primary sources *evidence* and *illustrate* argument—but, crucially, neither has a monopoly on any of these roles. When students struggle with the distinction, it is often because they're tempted—despite Tosh's caution!—to see “primary” and “secondary” as intrinsic properties of sources, and/or because they're still finding their grip on the varieties and components of historical argumentation, and so are still learning to think through how sources relate to them.

I've adjusted my teaching by rethinking how I introduce the identification, evaluation, and classification sources. Students typically have a rough-and-ready sense of how to sort primary from secondary sources. A small-group brainstorming session will often yield an impressively comprehensive list. But it will also highlight areas of overlap—the newspaper article, the oral history interview, the textbook. Those two-way sources create an opportunity to point out that we can't meaningfully classify *any* source until we know what our question is, and how we want to go about answering it.

Once I've primed students in this way, I suggest that we can ask a more useful question than whether a source is primary or secondary: we can ask how a source relates to an author's argument. To drive home this point, and to offer practice engaging critically with the sources other historians use, I'll ask students to comb through a short article and identify what kind of work each source the author cites is doing. I suggest they look for sources falling into four categories:

Motivational Sources

When making historical arguments, we need to explain why it's necessary to make them; we need to answer the "so what?" question. One common strategy is historiographical. Historians review what other scholars have said about similar topics or themes and suggest that the material they have unearthed can benefit those discussions—for instance through an expansion, a qualification, a confirmation, or a counterexample. But we could also latch on to an issue of contemporary political or cultural interest, or appeal to matter of timeless importance. We could identify an oddity that, on its face, demands an explanation. Each of these strategies calls for different types of sources, but uses them in a similar way.

Situational Sources

If motivational sources answer the "so what?" question, situational sources answer the "what's new?" question. We must convince readers that our work meaningfully expands our historical vistas. To do so, historians often build connections to larger historiographical discussions or broader historical contexts. Situational sources, that is, support outward-looking components of historical arguments. They establish the connections between our topic—and our claims about it—and the wider historical and historiographical currents with which we expect our readers to be familiar, to show how the study at hand can illuminate them. Situational goals might overlap with motivational goals, but the two are worth distinguishing to help students tease apart the immediate interpretive stakes of an argument from its looser connections to adjacent or more general issues.

Evidential Sources

Some sources support historical arguments directly. They provide evidence that historians' claims about the past are accurate. This seems obvious, but making it explicit sets up a number of productive questions about the nature of the evidence historians use. Does the source provide the kind of support the author claims it does? Is it strong evidence? Is it the *only* evidence, or is it representative of a broader set of examples that might be invoked in its place? These are all questions we would like our students to consider eventually, but introducing them in the context of the range of roles sources play helps them learn to ask those questions of the right sources.

Illustrative Sources

Historians reserve some sources for when they are confident that they have otherwise established an argument. These sources have useful heuristic value, but perhaps they are too flimsy to bear evidential weight on their own. Against the background of a well-argued case, however, they might help snap that case to into focus. Sources such as these often appear in epigraphs, or small opening or concluding vignettes. They might contribute to describing the wider historical context in which readers should understand the central story. They often do not bolster the argument on their own

(although might play a small role), but they do focus readers' attention and make them more receptive to the sources that do the heavy lifting.

When my students complete this assignment, they often find sources that straddle boundaries, or otherwise evade classification. I then emphasize that this is not a fixed set of categories, but merely one helpful, more descriptive way of classifying sources. But I've nevertheless found the discussions this approach raises invaluable, principally because these source categories correspond to tasks a good historical argument should accomplish: It should explain why the argument is important, describe what it adds to our understanding, establish its plausibility, and drive home its message. Students probing whether a source does one or another of those things are learning how to read critically—to diagnose when an author is situating without motivating, or illustrating without evidencing, and to ward off such vices in their own writing.

These are not the only relationships sources can have to arguments. But this approach, which deemphasizes the staid and not altogether coherent primary-secondary distinction, focuses student attention on the source-argument relationship in a way that better scaffolds the basic skills of historical practice.

I have found this to be the case with my own students, at least if their questions are any indication. When I focused on cementing the primary-secondary distinctions in their minds, students embarking on their first independent projects would often ask whether one source or another was an appropriate primary or secondary source, or wonder how many of each type of source should appear in their bibliographies. They understood the distinction, but had trouble using it to unsnarl the tangle of sources they encountered in the wild. When we discuss sources in terms of their relationship to arguments, however, students tend to ask questions I can answer more constructively, questions like, "Is this source good evidence for this claim?," or, "What range of sources should I discuss to give a good historiographical motivation?" These questions offer a better basis for constructing a successful historical argument.

I don't propose sweeping away the primary-secondary distinction entirely. Despite its limitations, it is deeply entrenched, and it has some utility as a rough differentiator. But it can be useful to dislodge that crude binary from the foundational place it currently holds in history pedagogy. By presenting it as just one of the possible ways to classify our sources, we can refocus students' common worries in productive ways.

The standards of historical argumentation were a black box to me when I was a beginning history student. I'd hopefully pile claims atop evidence, and adjust my expectations based on what seemed to please my professors, developing my instincts through laborious trial, error, and feedback. I suspect it is similar for most; my students exhibit those same anxieties when they ask questions like, "how many primary sources do I need?" The strategy presented here can neither erase that worry, nor confer the feel for sources that comes only with experience. But reframing our discussions of sources in terms their role building arguments *can* change that question into

something like “how can I tell when the sources I have are good enough?” If it accomplishes that, then it has done useful work toward initiating students into the historian’s craft.

Autobiographical Description

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