

Selecting Credible Sources: Primary Sources

What is it? A **primary source** is a record or an artifact from the past that was created by someone who witnessed an event or lived through an era. Examples are letters, diaries, interviews, photos, and things such as tools, clothing, or weapons.

How to do it. To select a primary source that is **credible**, or believable, you must ask questions about the source.

- Who created this source? What was its purpose?
- Is there any reason to think that the creator might exaggerate, leave out important information, or not tell the truth?

You might need to find out more about the source or its creator. You might also compare the source to other views of the same event.

Try it. Suppose that you are researching this question: *Who was to blame for the Boston Massacre?* “Boston Massacre” is the American name for a fight between British troops and a crowd of angry colonists in 1770. The colonists started a small riot, and British soldiers killed five of them. Consider the following primary sources, and answer the questions.

1. Trial testimony of Dr. John Jeffries, who treated a wounded colonist who later died
2. Trial testimony of one of the British soldiers who fired at the colonists
3. A flyer entitled “An account of a late military massacre at Boston,” published in New York in 1770
4. An engraving that shows soldiers firing on unarmed citizens, created by Paul Revere, a silversmith living in Boston in 1770

| Source | Credible or not credible? | Why? | What else would you like to know about the source? |
|--------|---------------------------|---|---|
| 1 | Not very credible | It is unclear if Jeffries was an eyewitness or not. | Did Jeffries have political leanings toward either the Patriots or the British? |
| 2 | | | |
| 3 | | | |
| 4 | | | |