Understanding Primary and Secondary Sources

***What is a Primary Source?***

A **primary source** is a document that includes a first-hand account about an event, an object, or a person that was created during the time period being considered. Some common forms of primary sources include:

* Artifacts (such as a piece of Roman pottery from the classical antiquity period);
* Autobiographies;
* Diaries, journals, and memoirs;
* Eyewitness accounts;
* Government documents;
* Newspapers; and
* Photographs and videos.

Well-known examples include *The Iliad* by Homer, Plato’s *The Republic*, *The Art of War* by Sun Tzu, and Niccolo Machiavelli’s *The Prince*, to name a few.

***What is a Secondary Source?***

Though a secondary source may have the same subject matter as a primary source—that is, about a specific event, person, object, or period in time—it is different because it was created *after the fact*. Secondary sources are often written by scholars or historians; the authors of secondary sources ***did not*** experience or witness an event, person’s life, or time period firsthand. Some common forms of secondary sources include:

* Histories;
* Commentaries and criticisms;
* Textbooks; and
* Encyclopedias, biographical dictionaries, and other reference resources.

Examples might include a biography of Alexander the Great written by a 21st century scholar, a history textbook published by an educational company, a modern analysis of works by ancient Greek philosophers, and so on.