There are many sources of firsthand information, including diaries, letters, editorials, speeches, and legal documents such as wills and property titles. All of these are primary sources. Other primary sources include newspaper articles, generally written after the fact, and autobiographies and personal memoirs, images which are usually written late in a person’s life. Visual images such as photographs, paintings, and political cartoons also are primary sources. Because they provide a way to understand more directly what people of the time were thinking, primary sources are valuable tools.

Secondary sources also are descriptions or interpretations of events, but they are written after the events have taken place and by people who did not witness the events. Examples of secondary sources include history textbooks, biographies, encyclopedias, and other reference works. Writers of secondary sources have the advantage of being able to see what happened after the time period being studied. Thus they can provide a wider perspective than a participant or witness to an event can.

**How to Study Primary and Secondary Sources**

1. **Examine the material carefully.** Consider the nature of the source material. Is it verbal or visual? Is it based on firsthand information or on the accounts of others? Pay attention to the major ideas and the supporting details.

2. **Consider the audience.** Ask yourself this question: For whom was this message originally intended? Whether a message was meant, for instance, for the general public or for a specific, private audience may have shaped the message’s style or content.

3. **Be alert to bias.** Watch for words or phrases that present a one-sided or slanted view of a person or event.

4. **When possible, compare sources.** Try to examine more than one source on a given topic. Comparing sources gives you a more complete, balanced account of people and events and their connections.

5. **Draw conclusions.** Use your careful reading of the source material to draw conclusions about the event or topic discussed.

**Practicing Your Skill**

To practice your skill, read the passage below, which is part of the Farewell Address given by President George Washington as he was about to leave office in 1796. Then answer the questions that follow.

The great rule of conduct for us in regard to foreign nations is, in extending our commercial [trade] relations to have with them as little political connection as possible. So far as we have already formed engagements let them be fulfilled with perfect good faith. Here let us stop.

Europe has a set of primary interests which to us have none or a very remote relation. Hence she must be engaged in frequent controversies, the causes of which are essentially foreign to our concerns. Hence, therefore, it must be unwise in us to implicate [entangle] ourselves by artificial ties in the ordinary vicissitudes [ups and downs] of her politics or the ordinary combinations and collisions of her friendships or enmities [hostilities]. . . .

It is our true policy to steer clear of permanent alliances with any portion of the foreign world.

1. Is the passage a primary source or a secondary source? Why?
2. What is the basic message of this portion of Washington’s Farewell Address?
3. For what audience was this speech intended?
4. Why might Washington’s Farewell Address be a good source of information about early U.S. foreign policy?
**STUDYING PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SOURCES SKILL WORKSHEET**

**APPLYING THE SKILL I**
The items listed below are examples of primary and secondary sources. Write P for each primary source and S for each secondary source.

- 1. a newspaper article
- 2. a private journal
- 3. a biography
- 4. an editorial cartoon
- 5. a medieval tapestry
- 6. a textbook on the history of Asia
- 7. a photograph of a family vacation
- 8. a magazine article on the history of Texas
- 9. an autobiography
- 10. a property deed

**APPLYING THE SKILL II**
The following is an excerpt from the Declaration of Independence, which was written by Thomas Jefferson to explain why the American colonies wanted to break away from British control. To apply your skill, read the excerpt and then answer the questions that follow.

> When in the Course of human events it becomes necessary for one people to dissolve [break] the political bands which have connected them with another, and to assume among the powers of the earth, the separate and equal station to which the Laws of Nature and of Nature’s God entitle them, a decent respect to the opinions of mankind requires that they should declare the causes which impel [drive] them to the separation.—

> We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed [provided] by their Creator with certain unalienable [permanent] Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness.—That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving [receiving] their just powers from the consent of the governed,—That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the People to alter or to abolish [end] it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles, and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.

1. Why is the Declaration of Independence a primary source? _________________________________

_________________________________________________________________________________

2. What is the purpose of the first paragraph? _____________________________________________

_________________________________________________________________________________

3. To what rights are all people entitled, according to this excerpt? __________________________

_________________________________________________________________________________
**Studying Primary and Secondary Sources**

**Skill Lesson**

1. The passage is a primary source because it was written by Washington himself as he was about to leave office.

2. The basic message of the passage is that the United States should isolate itself politically from the other nations of the world.

3. The speech was intended for the American people.

4. Washington, as the first president of the United States, was in a unique position both to make U.S. foreign policy and to influence the foreign policy of his successors.

**Skill Worksheet**

**Applying the Skill I**

1. P
2. P
3. S
4. P
5. P
6. S
7. P
8. S
9. P
10. P

**Applying the Skill II**

1. The Declaration of Independence is a primary source because it is an original document containing firsthand information.

2. The purpose of the first paragraph is to provide justification for the separation of the American colonies from Great Britain.

3. All people are entitled to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

4. If a government abuses its power, the people have the right to do away with that government.

**Building Your Vocabulary**

**Skill Lesson**

1. Context refers to the other words or sentences that surround a specific word in a paragraph or sentence. The context can provide clues to a word’s meaning by supplying either a familiar synonym or an example.

2. The dictionary contains pronunciation guides and definitions of words.

3. Using a thesaurus to find synonyms might help familiarize you with new or unusual words.

4. Using new words is the best way to master them.

5. Students should list and define any new vocabulary words in the chapter they read and then check their definitions against those in a dictionary. They should also create a plan to commit those words to memory.

**Skill Worksheet**

**Applying the Skill I**

1. e
2. d
3. f
4. a
5. c
6. b

**Applying the Skill II**

1. ecosystem
2. veto
3. utopia
4. electors
5. depression
6. carpetbaggers
7. segregation
8. urban renewal

**Distinguishing Fact from Opinion**

**Skill Lesson**

1. The loaded words in the sentence are dedicated, hardworking, and successfully. These words might influence people to look favorably on the candidate.