Primary and Secondary Sources

Grade 11 history · historical thinking



Name: Date: Score: / 26

Distance from the event

A **primary source** was created at the time, by someone present or involved. A **secondary source** was written later, built from primary material. The difference is distance from the event, not honesty: a diary can lie and a historian writing a century later can be scrupulously fair.

That is why the useful question is never "is this source biased?" Everything is. The question is what a source can be trusted to tell you. A recruitment poster is poor evidence of conditions at the front and excellent evidence of what the state wanted people to believe.

Three habits do most of the work. Check the **provenance** — who made this, when, and for whom. Look for **corroboration** from a source with no reason to agree. And notice the **silences**: what a document carefully does not mention is often the most informative thing in it.

Part A — Vocabulary match each term to its meaning (8 marks)

1. Primary source	_____	A. Evidence created at the time of the event by someone present or involved
2. Secondary source	_____	B. A consistent slant in what a source includes or leaves out
3. Provenance	_____	C. Something a source leaves out, which may itself be evidence
4. Bias	_____	D. An account written later, built from primary sources
5. Corroboration	_____	E. Where a source came from, and who made it, when and for whom
6. Reliability	_____	F. Checking a claim against an independent second source
7. Audience	_____	G. The people a source was made for, which shapes what it says
8. Silence	_____	H. How much weight a source can bear on a particular question

Part B — Primary or secondary? write P or S (8 marks)

Source	P or S
A soldier’s letter home, written in 1917	
A history of the war published in 1998	
A photograph taken at a protest	
A documentary about that protest, made thirty years later	
A government census return from 1891	
An encyclopedia article about Victorian cities	

A factory owner’s wage ledger	
A journal article analysing wage ledgers	

Part C — Fill in the blanks (6 marks)

1. Where a source came from and who made it is its _____.

2. Checking a claim against an independent second source is _____.

3. A consistent slant in what a source includes is _____.

4. The people a source was made for are its _____.

5. Something a source leaves out is called a _____.

6. An account written later from primary material is a _____ source.

Part D — Two sources, one week (4 marks)

SOURCE A

The men are in excellent spirits and want for nothing. Rations are ample and the weather has been kind.

— Officer’s letter to a soldier’s family, October 1917

SOURCE B

Three men of my section reported sick with trench foot today. Rations arrived two days late. I have told no one at home.

— The same officer’s private notebook, same week

1. Both sources are primary and both were written by the same person in the same week. Explain why they disagree.

2. A historian can only use one. Which should they choose, and for what question?

Primary and Secondary Sources — Answer Key

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Part A — Vocabulary

1. **Primary source** → A
2. **Secondary source** → D
3. **Provenance** → E
4. **Bias** → B
5. **Corroboration** → F
6. **Reliability** → H
7. **Audience** → G
8. **Silence** → C

Part B — Primary or secondary?

1. **P** — A soldier’s letter home, written in 1917
2. **S** — A history of the war published in 1998
3. **P** — A photograph taken at a protest
4. **S** — A documentary about that protest, made thirty years later
5. **P** — A government census return from 1891
6. **S** — An encyclopedia article about Victorian cities
7. **P** — A factory owner’s wage ledger
8. **S** — A journal article analysing wage ledgers

Part C — Fill in the blanks

1. **provenance**
2. **corroboration**
3. **bias**
4. **audience**
5. **silence**
6. **secondary**

Part D — Two sources, one week

1. **Different audiences.**
   Source A was written for a worried family and probably passed a censor, so it reassures. Source B was written for nobody, so it records what the officer actually saw. Neither is a lie exactly; each does the job it was made for. Full marks need audience named as the cause.
2. **Either, depending on the question.**
   For conditions at the front, Source B: no audience to reassure. For how the war was presented to families at home, Source A, and B becomes the proof that A was managed. Credit any answer that pairs a source with a question it can actually answer.