Research strategies for working with primary sources

A primary source document or collection is the “raw stuff” of history. Diaries, letters, newspapers, recordings and films provide an upfront, often revealing glimpse at a particular person, event or historical time period. When using primary source material, it is important to devise a sound research strategy. For instance, you may want to examine your document(s) closely, word by word, mining everything you can, or, if looking for general information or simply wanting to absorb the “flavor,” skimming may work best.

Say you visit an archive and without any background knowledge of the source, begin working with a travel diary from the early 1930’s. After paging through and digesting the basic chronology and subject matter, what questions arise?

1) Are there any available files about the person who wrote the diary? If not, are you able to find any information through further archival research? Are you able to determine the purpose of the diary? If handwritten, spend a little time acclimating to the style of handwriting, looking for quirks that will help you figure out difficult-to-read passages.

2) With further research in mind, browse through the diary and identify important “keywords” – specific people, places, events, details and concepts, unusual vocabulary or colorful turns of phrase. If you have specific research in mind, note or copy useful passages.

3) Why is this particular diary useful? Is the person writing it important? Does it tell us something about the Great Depression of the early 1930’s? Does it tell us something about the places the traveler visits? The types of transportation and accommodations? Does it mention Prohibition? While reading the diary, think of questions for further research.

4) How would you place the diary in the context of its time? Are there useful primary sources available, such as other diaries, correspondence, newspaper and magazine accounts, government documents, census records? What primary resources are available in the library and online? Examples of library and archives resources: microfilmed newspapers, bound periodicals, government documents. A growing collection of online sources include Googlebooks, Ancestry.com (Archives has a subscription), Familysearch.org, the Internet Archive, various newspaper archives and much more.

5) What secondary sources provide a fuller picture, including background information, summarized historical information and analysis? Examples of library and archives resources: books, periodicals, films, archival collections and more. When broadening your research, always consult with librarians, archivists, and experts on the topic.