Primary Sources
Why do you need primary sources?

Using original primary sources is considered a key element of historical research, especially at higher levels of study.

Your research may be focused specifically on a key primary source, or you may use primary sources to help support your own argument.
How should you decide which primary sources to use?

Consider the following questions.
Think strategically...

• **When?** Timeframe
  – This could be as broad or specific as you require.
  – You may be focusing on a specific timeframe, e.g. a presidential term.
  – Note for 20\(^{\text{th}}\) Century studies: Copyright kicks in in the US in 1923, so there will be very little freely available after that date. If it exists, it will probably be in published collection, or behind a paywall.
Think strategically...

• **When?** Timeframe

• **Where?** Location/geographic focus
  – Again, depending on your research, this can be as specific or as broad as you need.
Think strategically...

• **When?** Timeframe
• **Where?** Location/geographic focus
• **Who?**
  – This could be an individual, a group or organisation
  – Consider the key primary material they used.
  – Note: the more specific the individual or group, the more niche your research will be.
Think strategically...

- **When?** Timeframe
- **Where?** Location/geographic focus
- **Who?** People – individuals, organisations, groups
- **Why?**
  - What aspect are you particularly focusing on? The political, the social, the personal?
  - What sources might help provide this aspect, e.g. official papers, diaries?
Think strategically…

• **When?** Timeframe
• **Where?** Location/geographic focus
• **Who?** People – individuals, organisations, groups
• **Why?** Aspect – social, political
• **What?** Type of source – newspapers, letters, memoirs, official publications, images, audio-visual, ephemera, statistics/data
Think strategically…

- **When?** Timeframe
- **Where?** Location/geographic focus
- **Who?** People — individuals, organisations, groups
- **Why?** Aspect — social, political
- **What?** Type of source — newspapers, letters, memoirs, official publications, images, audio-visual, ephemera, statistics/data

But also laterally — where else could you look for further background/similar sources?
HOW TO FIND PRIMARY SOURCES
Finding primary sources

**Published sources**

- Print
- Microform
- Eresource/database
- Online/web

- In some ways more easier to find, as you look for them similarly to secondary literature:
  - Find out how/where it was published and the format of the publication.
Finding primary sources

Unpublished/manuscript

- Where is the original/archive?
  - Oxford
  - UK
  - US
- Is there a reproduction available?
  - Print
  - Microform
  - Eresource/database
  - Online/web

Unpublished sources are trickier, but there are two questions to ask yourself.
- First, where is the source (or where is it likely to be)?
- Secondly, is there likely to be a reproduction, which will put you right back in the published sources box – where/how/format etc.
- If no reproduction exists, that’s the point at which you find yourself having to visit the original, and where those are will depend on how accessible the source is going to be to you.
You can find all the resources in this presentation in three ways…

- Physical material, in either print, manuscript or microform – orange
- Eresource/database (subscribed to by Oxford) blue
- OA online resource/website – green