

RUSA Guidelines for Secondary Source Literacy for History

History:

Developed by an ad hoc subcommittee of the Academic Librarians Committee, History Section, RUSA (Reference and User Services Association), ALA (American Library Association): Cynthia Levine, Scott Libson, and Malia Willey. Approved by the History Section's Executive Committee, February 8, 2023.

The former Instruction and Research Services Committee of the RUSA History Section finalized [Information Literacy Guidelines and Competencies for Undergraduate History Students](#) in 2013. This document provided proficiencies for history in addition to the performance indicators and outcomes of the ACRL (Association of College & Research Libraries) [Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education](#). In 2020, the RUSA History Section Executive Committee asked the Academic Librarians Committee to prepare an updated document that aligns the guidance for undergraduate history students with the newer ACRL [Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education](#).

The Academic Librarians Committee formed an ad hoc subcommittee of volunteers to begin work. The subcommittee reviewed materials deemed vital to accomplishing this goal. Potential pathways for going forward were identified and presented to the History Section's Executive Committee. The Executive Committee agreed on an effort to create a document that expresses core ideas and learning objectives for secondary source literacy in historical studies to complement the SAA-ACRL/RBMS (Society of American Archivists and the ACRL Rare Books and Manuscripts Section) [Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy](#) and the related ACRL [Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education](#). The Governance Program Manager at SAA was consulted and confirmed this plan for adaptation.

The ad hoc subcommittee regrouped in 2021 to outline their work going forward. They worked together to draft the document. The draft was shared with the History Section's Academic Librarians Committee and the Executive Board to incorporate feedback. The document was submitted to the RUSA Professional Resources Committee in 2022.

Purpose:

Secondary source literacy allows researchers to engage with scholarly conversations about history.

These guidelines express learning objectives for secondary source literacy in historical studies to complement the SAA-ACRL/RBMS [Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy](#) and the related ACRL [Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education](#). The guidelines define secondary sources as information sources that provide interpretation, analysis, or commentary based on primary sources in order to provide understanding of a topic.

The primary audience is history librarians, along with others who would benefit from a companion document. These guidelines provide a shared language for articulating objectives related to secondary source literacy.

Learning Objectives:

These learning objectives articulate broadly the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed by researchers to successfully find, evaluate, contextualize, and use secondary sources. These objectives identify key activities that make up the iterative research process with an emphasis on special considerations important to historical research. History librarians may adapt these learning objectives to assess specific learning goals.

A person knowledgeable in the use of secondary sources can:

1. Prepare for a Research Project
 - 1.1. Understand that research is an iterative process, and as additional information is found, the research question(s) may change.
 - 1.2. Recognize the difference between primary, secondary, and tertiary sources for the discipline of history; that those categories depend on the relationship of a source to a research topic; that secondary sources can be popular or scholarly; and that the most common formats for historical secondary source research are scholarly books and journal articles. Other useful materials for history research include dissertations and book reviews. Under some circumstances, popular sources such as blogs, articles in popular publications, or other online content may serve as useful materials.
 - 1.3. Use tertiary or other sources of background information to begin identifying details relating to areas of curiosity or interest (e.g. names, places, events) and changes in language that might impact one's ability to find sources.
 - 1.4. Develop a preliminary research question.
 - 1.5. Using keywords and subjects found in the tertiary sources, begin initial searches for secondary sources.
 - 1.6. Make note of any core works mentioned in secondary or tertiary sources that are foundational to a research topic or frequently cited.
 - 1.7. Draw on secondary sources to contextualize and refine research questions.
2. Search and Access
 - 2.1. Choose appropriate databases and library catalogs to locate secondary sources, keeping in mind the scope of databases will determine the potential results. No search system is comprehensive and all include biases.
 - 2.2. Select and adjust search terms using keywords and controlled vocabulary accordingly.
 - 2.3. Employ flexible search strategies that make use of the searching mechanisms of a given database or catalog.
 - 2.4. Understand that a researcher's inability to find sources for a given research topic could have many causes and corresponding solutions. The researcher might be using a search tool that was not appropriately scoped to the desired content, or they might be employing a flawed search strategy, or the topic might be unstudied or understudied.
 - 2.5. Trace citations to find additional sources relevant to a research project. Examine works cited in secondary sources to find earlier sources, including primary sources. Use citation search tools to find more recent work that cites relevant sources.
3. Select Sources for Relevance
 - 3.1. Assess the appropriateness of a secondary source for meeting the goals of a specific research or creative project by identifying key bibliographic components.

- 3.2. Recognize that authors produce secondary sources for various audiences and that a researcher's needs may require a source addressed to a particular audience, such as a scholarly article written for an academic audience or a popular publication written for a general audience.
- 3.3. Collect and manage citations to secondary sources that may be used in the final project.
4. Interpret, Analyze, and Evaluate
 - 4.1. Identify and summarize information in secondary sources relevant to the research topic.
 - 4.2. Critically evaluate the perspective of the creator(s), including authority, tone, subjectivity, biases, social context(s), methods, and/or guiding theories, and consider how these relate to the original purpose(s) and audience(s) of the source.
 - 4.3. As part of the analysis of available resources, identify, interrogate, and consider the reasons for silences, gaps, contradictions, or evidence of power relationships in the scholarly record and publication practices and how they impact the research process.
5. Contextualize and Converse
 - 5.1. Recognize that historians depend upon, engage, and argue with their predecessors. Anyone who creates historical arguments and narratives is participating in that conversation and must acknowledge that earlier work.
 - 5.2. Seek out and understand the historical, intellectual, and methodological contexts of secondary sources.
 - 5.3. Try to understand how and why historians' questions and arguments about particular topics have changed over time (including who or what has had the greatest influence in shifting that scholarship), while also accepting that contradictory interpretations are inevitable and should be acknowledged.
6. Use and Incorporate
 - 6.1. Examine and synthesize a variety of sources in order to construct, support, or dispute a research argument.
 - 6.2. Cite secondary sources in accordance with appropriate citation style guidelines and professional conduct.
 - 6.3. Adhere to copyright laws when incorporating scholarship in a research or creative project.

References:

Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education, American Library Association, February 9, 2015.

<http://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework>

Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy, SAA-ACRL/RBMS Joint Task Force on the Development of Guidelines for Primary Source Literacy, June 2018. <https://www2.archivists.org/standards/guidelines-for-primary-source-literacy>

Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education, American Library Association, January 2000.

<https://alair.ala.org/handle/11213/7668>

Information Literacy Guidelines and Competencies for Undergraduate History Students, American Library Association, August 27, 2013. <http://www.ala.org/rusa/resources/guidelines/infoliteracy>