

# Problem Solving Like a Historian

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## WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about how historians find, evaluate, and use sources. Not all sources of information are equally valuable. It is essential that good historians know what sources are credible and which ones are not. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Introduction
2. Problem Solving like a Historian
  - a. Secondary Sources
  - b. Primary Sources
3. Sources in Action



## BEFORE YOU START

Why do you think it's important to study past economic challenges in U.S. history?

## 1. Introduction

We often hear about “the economy” in the news as if it’s a mysterious and unpredictable force in our lives, but an **economy** is simply a system of how money changes hands and how goods and services are bought and sold. The economy is an essential part of society, so understanding what it is and how it impacts our daily lives allows us to adapt to economic changes using agility and problem solving.

In this challenge, we’ll explore present-day economic concerns by relating them to **economic crises** in U.S. history and exploring possible preparations and solutions. We will examine past economic downturns—the Great Recession of 2008, the Great Depression of the 1930s, the Energy Crisis of the early 1970s, and the bursting of the dot-com bubble in the early 2000s—to understand how they affected people’s lives and how people survived them. Those who lived through these particularly challenging times had to be agile—adaptable, resourceful, and quick-thinking—to support themselves and their families through economic hardship.

As an important step in looking to the past to find solutions in the present, we’ll also examine how historians approach problem solving by using reliable sources to inform their solutions. And like historians, we too will learn how to evaluate potential sources to make sure they’re both trustworthy and closely related to what we’re investigating. Evaluating a source allows you to understand and apply information more effectively, making the source a powerful tool for problem solving.



### Economy

The system according to which money is acquired and spent and goods and services are bought and sold.

### Economic Crisis

A sudden downturn in the financial health of a country, usually due to a decrease in production, an increase in unemployment, or uncontrolled inflation or deflation.

## 2. Problem Solving like a Historian



### Problem Solving: Why Employers Care

Your problem solving skill is important for nearly every aspect of your life. It's essential for handling complex or difficult work situations, so employers look for candidates who are great problem solvers.

Historians also use their **problem solving skill** to find answers to questions they have about the past. But historians solve problems in a particular way: they investigate sources that contain information about the topic they're studying so they can come up with the best possible answers.

Problem solving like a historian means using relevant and reliable information to come up with the best solution you can. Let's look at some of the sources historians use when they investigate the past.

A historical source is a document or other item that provides information about the past. Historians use sources to answer questions about the past and, in some cases, to apply what they've learned to the future. Sources help paint a picture of an event and provide insights into how people thought and acted at the time.

Just about everything historians use to study history can be divided into primary and secondary sources.

- Primary sources are objects that were created at the time being studied.
- Secondary sources are created at a later date.

Let's look at both more closely.

### 2a. Secondary Sources

If a source describing a historical event doesn't come directly from a firsthand or **contemporary** account, it's a **secondary source**. Secondary sources are typically written by historians or journalists who are describing past events but were not actually present at the time.

Examples of secondary sources include:

- textbooks (such as this webtext)
- articles interpreting a topic or event
- biographies

Secondary sources provide an overview of historical topics and time periods, and may include quotations from primary sources. They also allow historians to consider different interpretations of a topic.



#### TERMS TO KNOW

##### Contemporary

Happening or living at the same time.

##### Secondary Source

A description of an event created by someone who learned about it from other sources. Secondary sources often include analysis and interpretation.

## 2b. Primary Sources

**Primary sources** are artifacts created during the time of an event by individuals living through it. They are the most important pieces of evidence that historians use to understand the past. It's through finding and carefully analyzing primary sources that historians are able to answer questions about the past and make connections with what's happening now.

Examples of primary sources include:

- letters or journal entries
- newspaper articles published at the time of the event
- surveys, census data, maps, and other official records
- photographs or artwork
- interviews or oral histories

Primary sources usually come from the very specific point of view of one person and are useful for learning the details of a time in history. When historians read enough firsthand accounts, they can put them together like a puzzle to get a sense of the bigger picture.



#### BIG IDEA

It is important to note that primary sources are not necessarily better than secondary sources. Consider how individuals may manipulate their own stories to make themselves look better than they really are.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### Primary Source

An account of an event by someone who experienced it.

## 3. Sources in Action

Let's look at a few examples of how primary and secondary sources could be used to investigate real questions.



**EXAMPLE** Imagine students wanted to learn more about the history of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. They would want to look at primary sources—the New York Times from September 12, 2001, for example, or interviews with people who lived through the attacks. They would also want to read secondary sources to understand how scholars have interpreted the events, such as by reading books written years later (for

example, September 11 in History, edited by historian Mary L. Dudziak).

Primary and secondary sources each provide valuable insights into events in history. Taken together, they help us learn lessons from the past.

Of course, you don't have to be a historian to use sources for problem solving.

➞ **EXAMPLE** When you think about going out to dinner, you might look at customer reviews on a website like Yelp, or ask for friends' opinions. Each individual review is a source telling you one person's experience; by considering a larger number of reviews, you're more likely to get an accurate picture of a restaurant.



#### BIG IDEA

If you think about it, you encounter sources every day—when you read the news in the morning, watch the weather report, or check last year's sales figures at work. When you use that information to make decisions, you're using sources for problem solving.

In this course, you'll learn how to use historical sources carefully and thoughtfully. You'll then be able to take those techniques and apply them to researching problems at work or at home. In the next lesson, we'll look at strategies for identifying and evaluating sources that are both relevant and reliable.



#### SUMMARY

In this lesson, you were **introduced** to four periods of economic instability in the United States that demanded agility and problem-solving to endure and overcome. You also learned what it means to **problem-solve like a historian**, by finding and evaluating sources to answer questions about the past. Historians make use of **primary sources** and **secondary sources** to learn about and interpret the past. By putting these **sources into action** together, historians can develop a more accurate understanding of the past than one type of source alone can provide. Finally, you learned that the same problem-solving techniques that historians utilize can be useful in your own endeavors.

Best of luck in your learning!

Source: Strategic Education, Inc. 2020. Learn from the Past, Prepare for the Future.



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**Secondary Source**

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