

HANDOUT: USING THE LIBRARY OF CONGRESS WEBSITE FOR PRIMARY SOURCE RESEARCH

For an in-depth explanation of the contents and use of www.loc.gov, visit this tutorial from the Midwest Regional Center for Teaching With Primary Sources: <http://teachingprimarysources.illinoisstate.edu/tpsmidwestregion/>

American Memory: <http://memory.loc.gov>

1. "Search all collections": This general search will gather every document that contains all of the words of your search. You cannot limit the search by date, document type, or with Boolean limitations. Use this search in the early days of primary research, but be prepared to sift through many sources.

Example: A search for "Minnesota civil war" comes up with 946 sources, with sources as varied as letters from Abraham Lincoln to commemorative statues in St. Paul.

2. "Browse collections by topic": This search will slightly narrow your pool of collections. If you click on one of the topics provided, a list will appear of all collections that have some reference to that topic. You are given the option to unclick certain collections that you do not want searched.

Example: Click on "African-American history", and a search for "Minnesota" retrieved 110 sources.

3. "More browse options": This search will allow you to search very specific topical collections. Certain subjects are listed under each topical choice; clicking on those subjects will take you directly to the topical collection. Clicking on the topical heading will lead you to a list of collections, similar to "Browse collections by topic."

Example: Choose "National Woman's Party" under "Women's History." A search for "Minnesota" retrieves nine sources.

4. "Browse collections by time period/containing/by place": These searches will simply bring you back to the larger list of collections. Often, these searches are not helpful as the search takes into consideration all the bibliographic information, which could contain details not relevant to your topic.

Example: Browse collections by time period and choose "1930-1949." A search for "Minnesota soldiers" reveals several images of a Minnesota veterans' home complex, built over the course of many decades, as well as a speech by Helen Keller, from the Alexander Graham Bell papers, that uses the word "Minnesota" in passing.

Library of Congress main page: www.loc.gov

“Resources for ... Researchers.”

1. On the right-hand side, under “Exploring the Collections,” click on “LC Online Catalogs.”

“Basic search” and “Guided search” have more options for limiting searches to specific parameters: date, type of source, Boolean terms. The drawback, however, is that not all of these resources have electronic copies available. When you retrieve a list of sources, you will need to check for the small magnifying glass on the right-hand side that says “Electronic Resource Available.” Beware that the electronic resource might be a bibliographic citation or another link, and not necessarily a primary document.

Example: Under “Basic Search”, a search for “Minnesota women” retrieves 518 sources. The first resource that has a magnifying glass, More Than Petticoats, has bibliographic and publisher information as the available electronic resources. The second source with that icon, Lake Minnetonka views, has a link to the Prints and Photographs Division, where you have to conduct another search for that document; no images surfaced when “Lake Minnetonka” was searched.

2. In the middle section, under “Special Materials”, you may search specific divisions of the Library of Congress. Most helpful to student or teacher researchers will be “Geography and Map,” “Manuscript,” “Motion Picture and “Television,” “Prints and Photographs” and “Recorded Sound.”

Example: Click on “Geography and Map,” and click on “Geography and Map Division Map Collections.” Under “search by keyword,” a search for “Minnesota” retrieves 66 documents, including maps of cities, counties and forests.

Veterans History Project: www.loc.gov/vets

“Search the Veterans Collections.”

A search in the Veterans History Project collections will allow you to search documents and interview transcripts of veterans from six American wars. You can also limit by branch of service, gender and prisoner of war status. Searching for a digitized collection will ensure that you will have access to digital documents.

Example: A search for “Minnesota” contained in “All fields together” and “yes” chosen for “Digitized Collection” retrieved 83 veterans. Some were born in Minnesota, others trained at Fort Snelling, and others have mention of Minnesota in their collections. Digital documents vary by veteran, but include items such as interview videos, images, memoirs and other documents.