

Firsthand vs. Secondhand Accounts

Name: _____

Date: _____

Score: _____ / 10



Quick Review

A firsthand account is told by someone who was there. It includes feelings and personal details. A secondhand account is told by someone who studied the event later. It focuses on facts and the big picture.

PART 1 — READ

Read the passage. Then answer the questions.

Two Views of the 1906 San Francisco Earthquake

Account 1 (Firsthand): From the diary of Anna Lin, age 12, written April 19, 1906.

I woke up before the sun. The whole bed was shaking, and I thought my brother was playing a trick on me. Then I heard our dishes crashing in the kitchen and Mama yelling for us to get under the doorway. The floor moved like a wave. My doll fell off the shelf and her head rolled across the room. Outside, the chimney from Mr. Halloran's house had broken off and was lying in the street, smoking. I could smell something burning. Mama said we had to walk to the park because the buildings might not be safe. We took only one bag and the cat. People on Market Street were quiet, like they did not know what to say. I held Mama's hand the whole way.

Account 2 (Secondhand): From a children's history book published in 2018.

On April 18, 1906, a powerful earthquake struck San Francisco, California. Scientists today estimate that it measured about 7.9 on the moment magnitude scale, making it one of the strongest quakes ever recorded in the United States. The shaking lasted about forty-five seconds and damaged hundreds of buildings. Even worse, broken gas lines started fires across the city. Because so many water pipes were also broken, firefighters could not put the fires out. Over the next three days, the fires destroyed more than 28,000 buildings. About half of the city's 400,000 people lost their homes. The disaster led California and other states to pass new laws requiring stronger building designs in earthquake zones.

PART 2 — PRACTICE

Read BOTH accounts. Then answer the questions.

- Which clue BEST shows that Account 1 is a firsthand account?
 - It is written in the words "I" and "Mama" by someone who was there.
 - It is dated April 19, 1906.
 - It mentions a place in San Francisco.
 - It uses short sentences.



2. Which clue BEST shows that Account 2 is a secondhand account?
 - A. It mentions the city of San Francisco.
 - B. It uses the word "earthquake."
 - C. It tells a story about one family.
 - D. It was written in 2018 and gives wide facts and statistics about the whole city.
3. Which detail appears ONLY in the firsthand account?
 - A. The earthquake measured about 7.9 on the magnitude scale.
 - B. Fires destroyed more than 28,000 buildings.
 - C. A doll fell off the shelf and its head rolled across the room.
 - D. About half of the city's people lost their homes.
4. Which detail appears ONLY in the secondhand account?
 - A. The smell of something burning
 - B. The shaking lasted about forty-five seconds.
 - C. A chimney lying in the street
 - D. Walking to the park while holding Mama's hand
5. If you wanted to learn how PEOPLE FELT during the earthquake, which account would help you MOST?
 - A. Account 1, because it shares one child's thoughts and feelings as the event happens
 - B. Account 2, because it lists how many people lost their homes
 - C. Account 2, because it gives the exact magnitude of the earthquake
 - D. Account 1, because it tells the date of the earthquake
6. If you wanted to learn how the earthquake affected the WHOLE CITY, which account would help you MOST?
 - A. Account 1, because it describes Anna's street
 - B. Account 1, because it mentions one neighbor's chimney
 - C. Account 2, because it gives city-wide totals like 28,000 buildings destroyed
 - D. Both accounts equally, because they share the same facts
7. Which idea is supported by BOTH accounts?
 - A. The exact magnitude was 7.9.
 - B. Buildings were damaged in San Francisco.
 - C. Fires burned for exactly three days.
 - D. New laws were passed after the earthquake.



8. Why are firsthand AND secondhand accounts BOTH useful to a historian?
- A. Firsthand accounts give numbers; secondhand accounts give feelings.
 - B. Firsthand accounts are always right; secondhand accounts are usually wrong.
 - C. Both accounts tell exactly the same details in different words.
 - D. Firsthand accounts give personal experiences; secondhand accounts give wider facts and context.
9. Choose ONE detail from each account that shows the focus is different. Explain what each focus is.

10. Which detail from Account 1 BEST helps explain WHY the city-wide fires in Account 2 spread so quickly?
- A. Anna mentions smoke and a burning smell within minutes of the shaking.
 - B. Anna walks to the park while holding her mother's hand.
 - C. Anna brings the family cat in a bag.
 - D. Anna's doll falls off the shelf.



Answer Keys

- 1 A B C D
- 2 A B C D
- 3 A B C D
- 4 A B C D
- 5 A B C D

- 6 A B C D
- 7 A B C D
- 8 A B C D
- 9
- 10 A B C D

Explanations

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| 1. A | Personal pronouns from a witness are the strongest firsthand clue. B is true (the date helps) but a secondhand source can also include a date. C is true of both accounts. D is about style, which is not a reliable firsthand sign. |
| 2. D | Being written long after AND giving city-wide statistics together signal a secondhand history source. A and B are true of both accounts. C describes Account 1 (firsthand), not Account 2. |
| 3. C | The doll is a small personal moment — only a firsthand witness would record it. A, B, and D are city-wide facts from the history book. |
| 4. B | An exact duration like "forty-five seconds" is the kind of measurement a history book adds later. A, C, and D are personal-moment details from Anna's diary. |
| 5. A | Firsthand accounts share feelings as the event unfolds. B gives a number, not feelings. C also gives a number. D names a date but not a feeling. |
| 6. C | City-wide totals are in Account 2. A and B describe one block of one street. D is wrong — the accounts focus on different scales. |
| 7. B | Anna sees a broken chimney; the book says 28,000 buildings were destroyed. Both show damage. A, C, and D are precise facts from Account 2 only — Anna does not give the magnitude, the fire's length, or the laws. |
| 8. D | D names the real difference. A flips them around. B is unfair to historians — secondhand accounts are not "usually wrong." C contradicts the differences shown. |
| 9. | Answer: Sample answers: (1) Account 1 says "My doll fell off the shelf," showing a personal-moment focus. Account 2 says "the fires destroyed more than 28,000 buildings," showing a big-picture focus. (2) Account 1 says "I held Mama's hand the whole way" (feelings/relationships); Account 2 says "about half of the city's 400,000 people lost their homes" (city-wide statistics). NOT acceptable: picking two details from the same account, or labeling both as the same focus. Strong answers pair a personal detail from Account 1 with a city-wide fact from Account 2 AND name each focus (personal/feeling vs. wide facts/context). Reject answers from one source only or with matching labels. |
| 10. A | Anna smells smoke right after the quake, which fits Account 2's claim that broken gas lines started fires across the city. B, C, and D are personal moments unrelated to the cause of the fires. |



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