

PRIMARY, SECONDARY, AND TERTIARY SOURCES

As you conduct research, you will consult different sources of information. You will encounter **primary**, **secondary**, and **tertiary** sources. What do these terms mean? This guide explains them and gives examples for each.

IMPORTANT NOTE: The types of information that can be considered primary sources may vary depending on the subject discipline, and also on how you are using the material.

For example:

- A government study about steroid use in college sports would be a **primary** source.
- A magazine article reporting on a government study about steroid use in college sports would be a **secondary** source.
- However, if you were researching how use of steroids is portrayed in the popular media, the magazine article could be considered a **primary** source.

PRIMARY SOURCES

Primary sources are original materials. They are from the time period involved and have not been filtered through interpretation or evaluation. Primary sources are original materials on which other research is based. They are usually the first formal appearance of results in physical, print or electronic format. They present original thinking, report a discovery, or share new information.

Note: The definition of a primary source may vary depending upon the discipline or context.

- Artifacts (e.g. coins, plant specimens, fossils, furniture, tools, clothing, all from the time under study)
- Audio recordings (e.g. radio or internet broadcasts)
- Diaries, Journals, Notes, Autobiographies & Memoirs
- Internet Communications (e.g. email, chat transcripts)
- Interviews (e.g., oral histories, telephone, e-mail);
- Journal articles describing original research or containing original analysis
- Letters, Postcards, & other forms of correspondence
- Newspaper and Magazine articles with eyewitness accounts, original reporting or analysis
- Original Documents (i.e. birth certificates, wills, marriage licenses, trial transcripts)
- Photographs
- Records of organizations, government agencies, and businesses (e.g. corporate reports, treaties, constitutions, census data, government documents)
- Speeches
- Survey Results and Analysis (e.g., market surveys, public opinion polls)
- User Manuals
- Video recordings (e.g. television or internet broadcasts)
- Works of art, architecture, literature, film, and music (e.g., paintings, sculptures, musical scores, movies, buildings, novels, poems)

SECONDARY SOURCES

Secondary sources are less easily defined than primary sources. Generally, they are accounts written after the fact with the benefit of hindsight. They are interpretations and evaluations of primary sources. Secondary sources are not evidence, but rather commentary on and discussion of evidence. However, what some define as a secondary source, others define as a tertiary source. Context is everything.

Note: The definition of a secondary source may vary depending upon the discipline or context.

- Biographical works
- Commentaries, criticisms
- Histories
- Magazine and newspaper articles (except eyewitness accounts, original reporting or analysis)
- Books, other than fiction and autobiography

TERTIARY SOURCES

Tertiary sources consist of information that is a distillation and collection of primary and secondary sources.

- Almanacs or Fact Books
- Chronologies or Timelines
- **Dictionaries and Encyclopedias**
- Directories
- Databases, Indexes, Abstracts, Bibliographies used to locate primary and secondary sources
- Textbooks

COMPARISON ACROSS THE DISCIPLINES

SUBJECT	PRIMARY	SECONDARY	TERTIARY
Art and Architecture	Painting by Manet	Article critiquing Manet painting	Encyclopedia article about “ <i>Manet</i> ”
Physical Sciences	Einstein's diary	Biography of Einstein	Dictionary entry on “ <i>Theory of Relativity</i> ”
Chemistry/Life Sciences	Journal article describing original research	Magazine article explaining journal article	Summary of magazine article in online database
Humanities	Letters by Martin Luther King	Web site on King's writings	Encyclopedia on “ <i>Civil Rights Movement</i> ”
Social Sciences	Notes taken by clinical psychologist	Magazine article about the psychological condition	Textbook on clinical psychology
Performing Arts	Movie filmed in 1942	Review of the movie	IMDB entry on the movie