

Primary vs. Secondary Sources

Your instructors may require you to use more primary sources than secondary sources for your research. Discover the identifying characteristics and advantages of primary and secondary (and tertiary) sources with this guide.

Primary Sources

Primary sources are uninterpreted, original, or new materials—e.g. an activist gave a speech, a scientist conducted original research, a student drew original conclusions from others' works, an artist created a piece of artwork, or your grandmother wrote an autobiography. Primary sources are first-hand and not interpreted by anyone else, they offer a personal point of view, and are created by a witnesses of, or participants in, an event (except in cases of historical research written after the fact). Researchers also create primary sources.

Questions to Ask When Determining If Something Is a Primary Source:

- Did the author conduct original research on the topic?
- Is the information the result of a survey?
- Is the information uninterpreted data or statistics?
- Is the source an original document or a creative work?
- Did the information come from personal experience?

Why Use Primary Sources?

Sources that present new research, original conclusions based on the research of others, or an author's original perspective are more helpful and effective for your needs. They allow you to interpret the information rather than relying on the interpretations of others. This is why your instructors may require you to seek out original research for your assignments.

Note: Keep in mind that because primary sources reflect the true meanings and ideas put forth by authors, the information itself may not be completely objective, well-reasoned, or accurate.

Examples:

- Scholarly journal article that reports new research and findings
- Newspaper/magazine articles written soon after the event/fact
- Court records
- Translation/excerpt of an original document
- Art or music
- Autobiographies
- Manuscripts
- Correspondence, letters
- Speeches
- Interviews
- Data from a research study
- Websites

Secondary Sources

Secondary sources are information sources that interpret, include, describe, or draw conclusions based on works written by others. Secondary sources are used by authors to present evidence, back up arguments and statements, or help represent an opinion by using and citing multiple sources. Secondary sources are often referred to as being “one step removed” from the actual occurrence or fact.

Questions to Ask When Determining If Something Is a Secondary Source:

- Did the author consult multiple sources to create this work?
- Is this information an interpretation or paraphrasing of another author's work?
- Did the information come from second-hand reporting?
- Is the source a textbook, review, or commentary?
- Does the source include quotations or images?

Why Use Secondary Sources?

Secondary sources are best for uncovering background or historical information about a topic and broadening your understanding of a topic by exposing you to others' perspectives, interpretations, and conclusions. However, it is better to critique an original information source (primary source) if you plan to reference it in your work.

Examples

- Most books (including textbooks)
- Documentary movies
- Art, book, movie, and theater reviews
- Analysis of a clinical trial
- Newspaper/magazine articles written as historical, opinionated, or reflective accounts
- Commentaries
- Biographies
- Dictionaries, encyclopedias
- Websites (also primary)
- A research paper written by you
- Literature reviews and meta-analyses

Note: Many times literature reviews and meta-analyses make up part of a peer-reviewed journal article. If the article includes new data or draws new conclusions, remember that overall it is a primary source.

Tertiary Sources

Tertiary sources consist of information which is a distillation and collection of primary and secondary sources - they provide overviews of topics by compiling and synthesizing information gathered from other resources.

Why Use Tertiary Sources?

Tertiary sources are convenient and easy-to-use; they are great resources to use as introductions to a new topic.

Examples

- Almanacs
- Bibliographies
- Dictionaries, encyclopedias (also secondary)
- Handbooks
- Fact books
- Guide books
- Indexes, abstracts, bibliographies used to locate primary and secondary sources
- Manuals
- Textbooks (also secondary)

Comparison of Similar Sources

Primary	Secondary	Tertiary
Statistical table of public school teachers' salaries in Minnesota.	Article describing trends in Minnesota teachers' salaries.	Index of sources for finding statistical information.
A reproduction of the Declaration of Independence.	Book exploring the history and political thought behind the Declaration of Independence.	Almanac explaining documents, symbols, and anthems of the United States.
Speech by well-known business leader.	Biography of business leader.	Textbook on human resources management.
Physical evidence in a court trial.	Lawyer's closing remarks/argument.	Dictionary of criminal justice.
Results of a treatment trial testing a new antidepressant on elderly men.	Book about treating depression with changes in diet and exercise.	Manual with practical tips for working with elderly patients with depression.
Blockbuster movie filmed in 1988.	Biography of the lead actor.	Guide about the movie.
Original artwork, perhaps a sculpture.	Critique of that sculpture.	Encyclopedia about 19th Century sculpture.
Notes taken by clinical psychologist.	Magazine article about the psychological condition.	Textbook on clinical psychology.