



Primary, Secondary & Tertiary Sources

Scope: As you conduct research, you will consult different sources of information. A professor may request **primary**, **secondary**, or **tertiary** sources. What does that mean? This guide explains these terms and gives examples for each category.

IMPORTANT NOTE:

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

For example:

- A magazine article reporting on recent studies linking the reduction of energy consumption to the compact fluorescent light bulb would be a secondary source.
- A research article or study proving this would be a primary source.
- However, if you were studying how compact fluorescent light bulbs are presented in the popular media, the magazine article could be considered a primary source.

PRIMARY SOURCES

Definition:

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.

Examples include:

- Artifacts (e.g. coins, plant specimens, fossils, furniture, tools, clothing, all from the time under study)
- Audio recordings (e.g. radio programs)
- Diaries
- Internet communications on email, listservs
- Interviews (e.g., oral histories, telephone, e-mail)

- Journal articles published in peer-reviewed publications
- Letters
- Newspaper articles written at the time
- Original Documents (i.e. birth certificate, will, marriage license, trial transcript)
- Patents
- Photographs
- Proceedings of Meetings, conferences and symposia
- Records of organizations, government agencies (e.g. annual report, treaty, constitution, government document)
- Speeches
- Survey Research (e.g., market surveys, public opinion polls)
- Video recordings (e.g. television programs)
- Works of art, architecture, literature, and music (e.g., paintings, sculptures, musical scores, buildings, novels, poems)
- Web site

SECONDARY SOURCES

Definition:

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.

Examples include:

- Bibliographies (also considered tertiary)
- Biographical works
- Commentaries, criticisms
- Dictionaries, Encyclopedias (also considered tertiary)
- Histories
- Journal articles (depending on the discipline can be primary)
- Magazine and newspaper articles (this distinction varies by discipline)
- Monographs, other than fiction and autobiography
- Textbooks (also considered tertiary)
- Web site (also considered primary)

TERTIARY SOURCES

Definition:

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

- Almanacs
- Bibliographies (also considered secondary)
- Chronologies
- Dictionaries and Encyclopedias (also considered secondary)
- Directories
- Fact books
- Guidebooks
- Indexes, abstracts, bibliographies used to locate primary and secondary sources
- Manuals
- Textbooks (also be secondary)

▲ COMPARISON ACROSS THE DISCIPLINES

SUBJECT	PRIMARY	SECONDARY	TERTIARY
Art and Architecture	Painting by Manet	Article critiquing art piece	ArtStor database
Chemistry/Life Sciences	Einstein's diary	Monograph on Einstein's life	Dictionary on Theory of Relativity
Engineering/Physical Sciences	Patent	NTIS database	Manual on using invention
Humanities	Letters by Martin Luther King	Web site on King's writings	Encyclopedia on Civil Rights Movement
Social Sciences	Notes taken by clinical psychologist	Magazine article about the psychological condition	Textbook on clinical psychology
Performing Arts	Movie filmed in 1942	Biography of the director	Guide to the movie

Source: University of Maryland, Guides to Info:

<http://www.lib.umd.edu/guides/primary-sources.html>

Adapted by LM March 2015