

Primary, Secondary, and Tertiary Sources

Sources of information are generally categorized as primary, secondary or tertiary depending on their **originality** (did the writer do the original work, or are they commenting on the work of others?) and their **proximity** or how close they are to the source (is this a first-hand account, or somewhat after the fact?).

Primary Sources

Definition: Primary sources are original materials on which other research is based. They present information in its original form, neither interpreted or condensed, nor evaluated by other writers. They are from the time period (for example, something written close to when an event happened is likely to be a primary source). Primary sources are original thinking, a report on discoveries, or new information.

Examples:

- Autobiographies, diaries and memoirs
- Court records
- Government documents
- E-mails
- Interviews (legal proceedings, personal, telephone or e-mail)
- Journal articles reporting results generated by experiments
- Letters
- Newspaper or magazine articles written **at the time** of the event, stories on a breaking issue or journalists reporting on their investigations
- Original documents (i.e. birth certificate or a trial transcript)
- Proceedings of meetings, conferences or symposiums
- Speeches
- Statistics or other tabulated data which has not been interpreted

Secondary Sources

Definition: Secondary sources are accounts written after the fact with the benefit of hindsight, they describe, interpret, analyze and evaluate primary sources. They comment on and discuss the evidence provided by primary sources. They are works which are one or more steps removed from the event or information to which they refer.

Examples:

- Biographical works
- Commentaries
- Dissertations
- Journal articles
- Newspaper and popular magazine articles
- Scholarly books
- Textbooks

Tertiary Sources

Definition: Tertiary sources compile, analyze and digest secondary (and sometimes primary) sources. They tend to be factual.

Examples:

- Abstracts
- Almanacs and fact books
- Bibliographies
- Databases and indexes
- Dictionaries
- Directories
- Guidebooks, handbooks and manuals



For more help determining the difference between primary, secondary, and tertiary sources, please ask the Library Resource Centre staff.