

Primary, Secondary, and Tertiary Sources

A Guide from University Libraries

When searching for information on a topic, it is important to understand the value of primary, secondary, and tertiary sources.

Primary sources allow researchers to get as close as possible to original ideas, events, and empirical research as possible. Such sources may include creative works, first hand or contemporary accounts of events, and the publication of the results of empirical observations or research.

Secondary sources analyze, review, or summarize information in primary resources or other secondary resources. Even sources presenting facts or descriptions about events are secondary unless they are based on direct participation or observation. Moreover, secondary sources often rely on other secondary sources and standard disciplinary methods to reach results, and they provide the principle sources of analysis about primary sources.

Tertiary sources provide overviews of topics by synthesizing information gathered from other resources. Tertiary resources often provide data in a convenient form or provide information with context by which to interpret it.

The distinctions between primary, secondary, and tertiary sources can be ambiguous. An individual document may be a primary source in one context and a secondary source in another. While these definitions are clear, the lines begin to blur in the different discipline areas.

In the humanities and social science

In the humanities and social sciences, primary sources are the direct evidence or first-hand accounts of events without secondary analysis or interpretation. In contrast, secondary sources analyze or interpret historical events or creative works.

Primary sources	Secondary sources	Tertiary sources
A primary source is an <i>original</i> document containing firsthand information about a topic. Different fields of study may use different types of primary sources, such as diaries, interviews, letters, original works of art, photographs, speeches, or works of literature.	A secondary source contains commentary on or discussion about a primary source. The most important feature of secondary sources is that they offer an interpretation of information gathered from primary sources: biographies, dissertations, indexes, abstracts, journals, articles, or monographs.	A tertiary source presents summaries or condensed versions of materials, usually with references back to the primary and/or secondary sources. They can be a good place to look up facts or get a general overview of a subject, but they rarely contain original material: dictionaries, encyclopedias, or handbooks.

Examples:

Subject	Primary	Secondary	Tertiary
Art	Painting	Critical review of the painting	Encyclopedia article on the artist
History	Civil War diary	Book on a Civil War battle	List of battle sites
Literature	Novel or poem	Essay about themes in the work	Biography of the author

In the sciences

In the sciences, primary sources are documents that provide full descriptions of the original research. For example, a primary source would be a journal article where scientists describe their research on the genetics of tobacco plants. A secondary source would be an article commenting on, or analyzing the scientists' research on tobacco.

Primary sources	Secondary sources	Tertiary sources
These are where the results of original research are usually first published in the sciences. This makes them the best source of information on cutting edge topics. This includes conference proceedings, interviews, journals, lab notebooks, patents, preprints, technical reports, or theses and dissertations.	These tend to summarize the existing state of knowledge in a field at the time of publication. Secondary sources are good to find comparisons of different ideas and theories and to see how they may have changed over time: books, reviews, textbooks, or treatises.	These types of sources present condensed material, generally with references back to the primary and/or secondary literature. They can be a good place to look up data or to get an overview of a subject, but they rarely contain original material. Tertiary sources include compilations, dictionaries, encyclopedias, handbooks, or tables.

Examples:

Subject	Primary	Secondary	Tertiary
Agriculture	Conference paper on tobacco genetics	Review article on the current state of tobacco research	Encyclopedia article on tobacco
Chemistry	Chemical patent	Book on chemical reactions	Table of related reactions
Physics	Einstein's diary	Biography on Einstein	Dictionary of relativity