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.

For more information about identifying and analyzing primary sources, visit this guide.

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);
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

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