

Primary and Secondary Sources

Primary Sources

Primary sources are original sources that have not been interpreted, discussed or analyzed. They can include first-person accounts of events, interviews, data obtained through original research, statistics, novels, artifacts, or historical documents.

Types of sources falling into this category vary by discipline. Here are a few examples:

- History: diaries, letters, manuscripts, news footage, speeches, maps, photographs
- Literature: original poems, novels, plays or stories
- Art and Music: original paintings, sculpture, compositions or recordings
- Science: original research reports and data, water pollution measures, fossils
- Political Science: polling data, census data, hearings, treaties, laws

Most scholars consider any article reporting the results of original research to be a primary source. However, some differentiate between the raw data and the analysis. For example, if a political scientist wrote an article discussing the results of a survey she conducted, the survey data could be considered primary and the researcher's conclusions secondary.

Secondary Sources

Secondary sources restate, explain, analyze, interpret or discuss primary sources. Some examples:

- A book in which the author reinterprets a historical event based on newly discovered documents
- A persuasive essay that uses statistics to bolster its arguments
- A magazine article discussing trends in voter attitudes, based on analysis of election returns
- A journal article critiquing a piece of art, a film, or a literary work
- A journal article reviewing recent research on a medical topic

NOTE: Some types of information sources fall into the "tertiary sources" category, as they are one step farther removed from the original source. Examples of tertiary sources are encyclopedia articles and textbooks, which summarize knowledge on a given topic.