



Types of Sources

A source is any person or place where you derive information to further understand or learn about a topic. Sources are typically found through conducting research in a library or on the internet. There are three main types of sources: primary, secondary, and tertiary.

Primary Sources

A primary source is a source that provides first-hand evidence or reports on whatever it is that is being studied. It can also be the actual text you are analyzing. It comes from someone directly involved in the events and provides original information.

Examples of Primary Sources

- Written first-hand accounts (i.e. letters and diaries)
- Autobiographies
- Photographs
- Artwork (If analyzing it as the subject)
- Physical objects and artifacts
- Interview transcripts or recordings
- Newspaper articles (If the newspaper is the subject)
- Court, legal, or government documents
- Raw, original statistical data (Think polls and questionnaires)

Speaking and Writing Center [1]: Remember that types of sources are contextual to what you are writing about. For example, autobiographies can be primary if you are analyzing the text itself, but it can also be secondary if you are using it to gather information about a subject.

Speaking and Writing Center [2]: The same can be said for newspapers. If you are discussing the newspaper as an historical artifact, it is a primary source; if you are citing a newspaper for the information it gives to you, it is secondary.

Secondary Sources

A secondary source analyzes or interprets information from primary sources. It is from someone not directly involved in the events and comments upon information found in another source, which may include adding original ideas to the analysis.

Examples of Secondary Sources

- Analytical writings
- Meta-analyses
- Reviews (i.e. Literature Reviews, film commentary)
- Biographies not written by the person it is about
- Documentaries

Tertiary Sources

A tertiary source is a source that summarizes information found in primary and/or secondary sources without providing original interpretation or analysis.

Examples of Tertiary Sources

- Dictionaries
- Encyclopedias
- Annotated Bibliographies



Questions to help you decide which kind of source you're working with:

You may come across a source that could be either primary or secondary. Some sources can be both, but it depends on how the source is being used. If you're ever unsure of how to categorize a source, ask yourself these questions:

- How am I interpreting this source when analyzing it?
 - ◆ i.e. If I am analyzing a piece of artwork that depicts a historical event, am I analyzing the piece of work itself (i.e. color, composition, etc.) or am I discussing the historical event it is about?
- Is this source trying to offer me first-hand or second-hand knowledge?
 - ◆ First-hand knowledge would indicate that the source is primary. Second-hand knowledge would indicate that the source is secondary.
- What does this source contain that I am trying to understand? Is it analysis or is it some sort of factual account?
 - ◆ Analysis is usually secondary while factual content could be either.
- Is this source an interpretation of an original idea or commentary?
 - ◆ If so, it is likely a secondary source.
- Who is the author of the source you are analyzing, and what is their relationship with the source's main idea(s)?
 - ◆ Is the author the creator of an original work (i.e. a novel), or is the author writing about known events, people, etc? Novels are often primary sources (because you are analyzing what the text means), but newspaper articles are often secondary sources because they are providing information.