### What’s the difference between primary, secondary, and tertiary sources?

The terms primary, secondary, and tertiary refer to the order that each occurs within the publication cycle of information.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Primary Sources</th>
<th>Secondary Sources</th>
<th>Tertiary Sources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>In General:</strong></td>
<td>- Original materials about a subject, experiment, time period, or event.</td>
<td>- Evaluations, interpretations, criticisms, analysis, or reproductions of original (primary) materials.</td>
<td>- Sources that compile or digest secondary materials.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- These sources are the evidence left behind by researchers, participants, and witnesses.</td>
<td>- These sources are the discussions of the evidence.</td>
<td>- These sources are usually factual.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Examples:</strong></td>
<td>- Reports of original research by those involved in the research</td>
<td>- Summaries or analysis of other people’s research or past events</td>
<td>- Examples:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Letters, emails, autobiographies, diaries, and interviews</td>
<td>- Biographies</td>
<td>- Dictionaries, encyclopedias, handbooks, manuals.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Objects, artifacts, and photographs</td>
<td>- Reproductions of objects, artifacts, &amp; photos</td>
<td>- Bibliographies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Creative works such as music, art, and literature</td>
<td>- Critical reviews of literary or artistic works</td>
<td>- Abstracts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>For: Sciences (Physical and Social)</strong></td>
<td>- Examples: Laboratory Notebooks, Letters, Journals (Diaries), Technical Reports, Clinical Trials, Research Studies, Patents, Conference Papers / Proceedings, Dissertations / Theses, Scientific Data, Books and Journal Articles if they follow criteria listed below.</td>
<td>- Examples: Books and journal articles if they follow the criteria listed below:</td>
<td>- Indexes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Most primary articles appear in scholarly peer reviewed journals. However, peer-reviewed journals may also contain secondary sources. Do not assume everything in a scholarly journal is a primary source.</td>
<td>- Most secondary sources appear in popular or trade magazines. However, some secondary sources such as news and reviews can also be found in scholarly peer-reviewed publications alongside the primary sources.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Characteristics:</td>
<td>- Characteristics:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Gives materials and methods for the research that was conducted, includes enough detail so the experiment can be repeated.</td>
<td>- Mentions some information from research, such as the subjects or participant numbers, but does not give enough detail to repeat the experiment.</td>
<td>- Bibliographies that compile sources such as:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Details the results of any experiments or research that the author has personally performed.</td>
<td>- Reviews, summarizes or describes research and/or experimental results by another researcher.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Gives complete references that support the author’s claims.</td>
<td>- Usually lists complete references that can be used to track down the original research.</td>
<td>- Indexes that compile sources such as:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Current Contents for Life Sciences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Public Affairs Information Service Index</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## What's the difference between primary, secondary, and tertiary sources?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Primary Sources</th>
<th>Secondary Sources</th>
<th>Tertiary Sources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **For: Humanities** | **Examples:** Books, newspaper articles, audio and video recordings from the time period or event being studied  
Memos, diaries, and autobiographies  
Letters, speeches, interviews  
Photographs  
Manuscripts  
Government documents | **Examples:** Summary or analysis of other people's research  
Biographies and articles about people  
Reviews of literary or artistic works  
Reproductions of original artwork (example: posters or postcards)  
Analysis or history of past events | **Examples:** Reference books that compile and digest sources such as:  
*New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*  
Bibliographies that compile sources such as:  
*250 Years of Afro-American Art: an Annotated Bibliography*  
Indexes that compile sources such as:  
*Women in Southern Literature: an Index* |
| **Characteristics:** | **Documents created during the time period being studied or at a later date by participants in or witnesses to the event being studied.**  
Sources reflect the individual viewpoint of a participant or observer | **Documents that interpret, explain, summarize or analyze an event or phenomenon.**  
Sources reflect the opinion of the author who has gathered information from other primary and secondary sources |  |

### Tip:

Another helpful way to determine or find a specific type of source is to use the library's InfoSearch Catalog. Pay attention to the words used in the item record descriptions. They can give you clues about the item’s classification. Try using some of these common subject headings to find or identify materials:

**Library of Congress Subject Headings for:**

**Primary**
- cases
- correspondence
- diaries
- fiction
- interviews
- letters
- pamphlets
- personal narrative
- pictorial works
- poetry
- recordings
- short stories
- speeches

**Secondary**
- biography
- criticism
- history
- government policy
- law and legislation
- moral and ethical aspects
- political aspects
- politics and government
- psychological aspects
- public opinion
- religious aspects
- social policy
- study and teaching

**Tertiary**
- abstracts
- bibliography
- chronology
- classification
- dictionaries
- encyclopedias
- guidebooks
- handbooks
- manuals
- identification
- indexes
- registers
- statistics