

What is a Primary Source?

Primary sources are directly related to an issue, event, or phenomenon. It is highly desirable that researchers access as many relevant primary sources as possible to keep their research as close as possible to the facts and events of the topic. However, keep in mind that every text has potential for bias or some hidden agenda. Therefore, even a "private" diary or allegedly "factual" account can have misrepresentations of events.

Examples of primary sources:

- Private diaries
- Photographs
- Direct results of research, experiments, & polls
- Laws
- Novels, poems, plays, movies, screenplays, & musical scores
- Interviews
- Contracts
- Eyewitness reports
- Contemporary accounts
- Artifacts
- Letters & memos
- Some corporate and governmental reports
- Speeches

When writing a paper about a work of fiction, the novel, play, or poem is your primary source for information. When writing a scientific paper, results of experiments and correlation studies are your primary sources. When writing a historical or religious paper, the texts from the historical moment in time in question are your primary sources.

What Is a Secondary Source?

A secondary source indirectly describes an event or issue from a distance. Good secondary sources use primary sources to compile their information. Secondary sources may help explain or interpret the text, but primary texts should be used as the main basis for any arguments or explanations. Secondary sources are usually credited to an author or authors and contain some original thoughts or analyses.

Examples of secondary sources:

- Handbooks
- Guides
- Textbooks
- Reviews
- Many non-fiction books and articles
- Analyses & commentaries

What Is a Tertiary Source?

A tertiary source provides a very broad summary of an issue or topic, typically by consolidating information from secondary and sometimes primary sources. Tertiary sources are usually not credited to an author. When you professor says "don't use Wikipedia," he or she usually means, "don't use any tertiary sources." If you do use them, make sure you track down the primary and secondary sources they cite to get more direct information. If no sources are cited, avoid the source completely.

Examples of tertiary source

- Encyclopedias, including Wikipedia
- Indexes
- Dictionaries
- Bibliographies
- Concordances
- Collections of quotes
- Databases
- Almanacs

Final note: Sometimes, the same type of sources may be considered either secondary or tertiary depending on how close it sticks to the primary sources.