



Primary and Secondary Sources

When writing a research paper you will likely need to use **primary sources** or **secondary sources**, or, very commonly, both. It is useful to understand the differences between these two types of sources.

Primary Sources...

- are firsthand accounts created at the time a historical event occurred, or are records of original ideas.
- consist of information that has not been analyzed, commented on, or interpreted.
- can be biased, depending on the view-point of the author.
- are valuable because they give an exact account of historical events or new ideas.

Examples of Primary Sources are:

- diaries
- photographs
- interviews
- manuscripts
- personal narratives
- letters
- speeches
- pamphlets
- original artwork
- original essays and literary works
- journal articles presenting new information
- maps

Secondary Sources...

- offer commentary, analysis, or interpretation of primary sources.
- are written many years after an event, or by people not directly involved in the event.
- are often written by people who have an expertise in the field.
- can be biased, depending on the view-point of the author.

Examples of Secondary Sources are:

- book reviews
- textbooks
- encyclopedias
- documentaries
- commentaries
- critical articles
- articles that interpret previous findings
- books that are not firsthand accounts, such as biographies and histories

The following questions can also help you decide if a source is primary or secondary...

- How does the author know the details (dates, times, names) present in their work? Were they present at the event? Is their information first-hand, or does it come from documents written by others?

- Does the author base their work on a single piece of evidence, or do they use multiple sources (such as letters from the event, articles with modern critiques, eyewitness accounts, and biographies about people involved)?

Hopefully now you have an idea of the differences between primary and secondary sources. However, it is also important to know **when you should use primary sources and when you should use secondary sources.**

Use Primary Sources when....

- you need an exact account of an historical event or new idea.
- you want to examine a document for yourself without the influence of modern commentaries or critiques.
- you want to gain a better understanding of the thought processes, attitudes, and concerns of the people at the time of an event.
- you need to clarify that an idea presented in a secondary source is what the original author intended to say.

Use Secondary Sources when....

- you need to provide historical context or critical perspectives.
- you need an analysis of a primary source, or a critique that compares several primary sources.
- you need to ground your own research in an academic setting (i.e., show that others have done similar research to yours and share or contradict your opinions).
- you want a list of primary sources that could potentially be useful in your research—the works cited page of a secondary source can be a great resource for this!

If you have any questions about primary versus secondary sources, or would like help finding primary and secondary sources, please feel free to ask a librarian!