Primary, Secondary, and Tertiary Sources

As you conduct research, you will consult different sources of information. An instructor or professor may request primary, secondary, or tertiary sources. What does that mean? This guide explains the terms and gives examples of some primary, secondary and tertiary sources.

**Primary Sources**

Primary sources are original materials. They are from the time period involved and have not been filtered through interpretation. Some common examples of primary sources are:

- Diaries, autobiographies, or other “eyewitness accounts”
- Interviews (legal proceedings, personal, telephone, e-mail)
- Letters
- Original documents (i.e. birth certificates, trial transcripts, government/historical documents)
- Patents
- Photographs and other artwork
- Survey research, data, and results from experiments
- Personal observations/interviews
- Works of literature
- Speeches
- Newspaper articles reporting on current events of the time. (Reviews or historical commentary in newspapers, however, would be considered secondary sources)
- Video and sound recordings

**Secondary Sources**

Secondary sources are accounts written after the fact with the benefit of hindsight. They are interpretations and evaluations of primary sources. Secondary sources are not evidence, but rather commentary on and discussion of evidence. Ideal secondary sources are usually characterized as both reporting events in the past as well as performing the function of generalization, analysis, synthesis, interpretation, and/or evaluation of the events. Some common secondary sources include:

- Biographies
- Dissertations
- Websites
- Text books
- Journal articles
- Monographs

**Tertiary Sources**

Tertiary sources are collections of primary and secondary sources, typically providing an overview or summary of a topic without analysis or critique such as:

- Bibliographies
- Library catalogs
- Directories
- Almanacs
- Encyclopedias (long or analytical entries may be considered secondary sources)

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