

Primary, Secondary, & Tertiary Sources

While the distinctions between reference sources, popular press periodicals, trade periodicals, and scholarly journals involve characteristics of the sources themselves, the distinctions between primary, secondary, and tertiary sources depend on how you plan to use the source and the disciplinary norms that govern your project.

Consequently, you cannot effectively make this determination without thinking about disciplinary context, your research question, and your research methods.

Identification in Context

Sources that are secondary or tertiary in one context might be primary sources in another.

For instance, if your research design called for a content analysis of the coverage of gender roles in high school health textbooks, then these textbooks would be your primary sources, rather than tertiary sources.

Likewise, if your research question was “How did 19th Century newspapers in the American Northeast address the publication of Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*?” then book reviews from that era might be one type of primary source you would want to consult, rather than a secondary source.

What are Primary Sources?

Primary sources are the original materials or evidence to be analyzed, evaluated, contextualized, or synthesized in the research process.

Classic Examples

- Historical newspapers
- Documentary photographs or videos
- Corporate or organizational records
- Works of art, literature, or music
- Eyewitness accounts or testimony
- Interviews
- Diaries, journals, or letters
- Statutes, laws, or regulations
- Speeches, legal decisions, or case law
- Archaeological or historical artifacts
- Survey research

In the Humanities and Social Sciences

Primary sources in the humanities are usually from the time period under study and offer first-hand accounts or direct evidence responsive to the research question. In the social sciences, primary sources can also include reports on surveys, ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, or participant observation.

In STEM-H Fields

Primary sources in STEM-H fields often look very much like secondary sources in the humanities and social sciences: they are the first articles published formally describing a research project or study. Other primary sources include patents, industrial designs or blueprints, and some technical reports.

Classic Examples

- Articles describing the research design and findings of original studies
- Articles describing new experiments or sets of experiments
- Reports on original research or observations
- Technical reports addressing an engineering or technological assessment
- Patents or industrial designs

Where can I find primary sources?

General purpose databases like *EBSCO Academic Search Complete*, *ProQuest Research Library*, and *JSTOR* include many sources that could be useful primary sources with the right research question. Discipline-specific databases can also be helpful.

There are also many historical primary sources in the Library Special Collections, at the Library of Congress, and in specialized databases like *SAGE Historical Documents*, *Lexis Nexis Academic*, *Early English Books Online*, and *Early American Imprints*.

What are Secondary Sources?

Secondary sources analyze, evaluate, contextualize, or synthesize evidence. They often give second-hand accounts based on engagement with primary sources.

Classic Examples

- Scholarly journal articles
- Scholarly books or monographs
- Interpretive newspaper or magazine articles and editorials
- Interpretive blog posts
- Book, art, music, or theater reviews
- A non-eyewitness record of an event written by someone without a close connection to the event

In the Humanities and Social Sciences

Secondary sources in the humanities and social sciences comment on or analyze texts, oral communications, artifacts, or archives of primary sources. Since some archives and research materials cannot be accessed by the public, secondary sources are sometimes the only means of getting in contact with the underlying evidence.

In STEM-H Fields

Secondary sources in STEM-H fields often look very much like tertiary sources in the humanities and social sciences. Because many primary sources are scholarly articles reporting first-hand on new studies or research, the secondaries often synthesize or analyze many such results.

Classic Examples

- Quantitative meta-analysis articles that use statistical methods to determine relationships or patterns in the published scholarly literature on a topic
- Systematic review articles that use a research question to select and synthesize published evidence relevant to that question
- Survey articles that summarize an entire field of research
- Scholarly book reviews

Where can I find secondary sources?

General purpose scholarly databases and archives like *EBSCO Academic Search Complete*, *ProQuest Research Library*, and *JSTOR* include many sources that could be secondary sources with the right research question. Also try subject-, field-, and discipline-specific databases.

What are Tertiary Sources?

Tertiary sources condense, summarize, and synthesize many secondary and/or primary sources. They may be intended to inform experts, scholars, students, or more general audiences.

Classic Examples

- Textbooks
- Encyclopedias and Fact Books
- Bibliographies, collections of abstracts, or indexes used to identify secondary or primary sources
- Literature review articles, like survey articles and systematic reviews in STEM-H fields, that synthesize many secondary sources

In the Humanities and Social Sciences

Tertiary sources can help you contextualize work within a broader field, help you locate citations to sources, provide definitions for specialized concepts or terminology, or provide background knowledge and contextual information about a topic.

In STEM-H Fields

Tertiary sources in STEM-H fields often are designed to digest or synthesize a large number of complicated or technical papers, often for general audiences or for practitioners or professionals who will apply scholarly knowledge. They provide background knowledge, which can help you generate a list of keywords or refine an early version of a research question.

Classic Examples

- Textbooks
- Specialized encyclopedias
- Manuals
- Specialized dictionaries
- Guides or guidebooks
- Fact Books

Where can I find tertiary sources?

The *Literati* tool can be very good for finding specialized encyclopedias, dictionaries, and fact books. Many textbooks, manuals, and reference materials are available in print or ebook form through the library catalog. To find literature review articles, survey articles, and systematic reviews, you might try including these terms when using the general purpose scholarly databases.