



# How to ... Distinguish Between Primary and Secondary Sources

In doing research it is very important to understand and be able to differentiate between primary and secondary sources. The distinction between primary and secondary sources is the degree to which an author is removed from the event described. This indicates to the reader whether the author is reporting impressions first-hand or recounting something second-hand.

## **Primary Sources**

A primary source is a first-hand contemporary account written by an individual who experienced or witnessed it. Primary sources allow you to examine the evidence first-hand without the opinions, analysis, and interpretations of others. Primary sources are original documents, such as: diaries, letters, memoirs, speeches, autobiographies, interviews and manuscripts. They may also include published articles in newspapers or magazines, as long as they are written soon after the event and are not historical accounts. Audio and video recordings, photographs, original literary and theatrical works, and research reports in the natural and social sciences may also be primary sources.

## **Secondary Sources**

A secondary source is a second-hand account or observation at least one step removed from the event described. Secondary sources interpret, offer commentary, analyze and draw conclusions about the events described in primary sources. Secondary sources make the information more accessible to the public by assembling and interpreting information from a variety of primary sources. The most common secondary sources are published works, often found in books and scholarly journal articles.

Some important questions to ask when deciding if a source is primary or secondary include:

- How does the author know these details?
- Was the author present at the event?
- Does the information come from the author's personal experience, or is it based on accounts written by others?

	<b>Primary</b>	<b>Secondary</b>
<b>Definitions</b>	Contain original and unanalyzed information.	Digest, analyze, interpret, or evaluate the information contained within primary sources. They often provide commentary or criticism.
<b>Timing of Publication</b>	Primary sources tend to be contemporary accounts, written at the time or soon after an event.	Secondary sources tend to be written later using primary sources.
For example, the <b>Historian</b> researching World War I might utilize:	Newspaper articles, weekly/monthly news magazines, diaries, correspondence, and diplomatic records of the time period being studied.	Articles in scholarly journals analyzing the war, possibly footnoting primary documents; books analyzing the war.
For example, the <b>Literary Critic</b> researching literature at the time of World War I might utilize:	Novels, poems, plays, diaries, correspondence of the time period being studied.	Published articles in scholarly journals providing analysis and criticism of the literature; books analyzing the literature; formal biographies of writers of the war.
For example, the <b>Psychologist</b> researching the effects of chemical warfare during World War I might utilize:	Original research report on the topic; study research notes taken by a clinical psychologist working with World War I veterans.	Articles in scholarly publications synthesizing results of original research; books analyzing results of original research.
For example, the <b>Scientist</b> researching long-term medical effects of chemical warfare on exposed veterans might utilize:	Published article in scholarly journal reporting on medical research study and its methodology.	Published articles in scholarly journals analyzing results of an original research study; books doing same.