



PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SOURCES AND THE RESEARCH PROCESS

When searching for information on a topic, it is important to understand the value of both primary and secondary sources. This handout briefly explains what these types of sources are and provides examples of each.

Primary Sources

A Primary source is an *original* document containing firsthand information about a topic.

Different fields of study may use different types of primary sources. Common examples of a primary source are:

- Diaries
- Interviews
- Letters
- Original works of art
- Photographs
- Works of Literature

Secondary Sources

A **secondary** source contains commentary on or discussion about a primary source. The most important feature of secondary sources is that they offer an *interpretation* of information gathered from primary sources. Common examples of a secondary source are:

- Biographies
- Dissertations
- Indexes, Abstracts.
Bibliographies (used to locate
a secondary source)
- Journal Articles
- Monographs

EXAMPLES OF PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SOURCES

Sometimes, the same source might be a primary source for one research paper and a secondary source for another. It all depends on the relationship of the source to your research question. For example, if you are researching Franklin Roosevelt's life, the book *No Ordinary Time: Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt: The Home Front in World War II* by Doris Kearns Goodwin would be a secondary source. If you were researching the literary style of Ms. Goodwin, it would be a primary source.

**From Joyner Library, East Carolina University,*
<http://www.lib.ecu.edu/Reference/workshop/primary.html>

Additional examples of primary and secondary sources relating to a particular subject:

<i>Subject</i>	<i>Primary Source</i>	<i>Secondary Source</i>
Art	Original artwork	Article critiquing the piece of art
History	Slave diary	Book about the Underground Railroad
Literature	Poem	Treatise on a particular genre of poetry
Political Science	Treaty	Essay on Native American land rights
Theater	Videotape of a performance	Biography of a playwright

**From Bowling Green State University, Library User Education, Primary vs. Secondary Sources,*
<http://www.bgsu.edu/colleges/library/infosrv/lue/primary.html>

Primary sources are first hand sources; secondary sources are second-hand sources. For example, suppose there had been a car accident. The description of the accident which a witness gives to the police is a primary source because it comes from someone actually there at the time. The story in the newspaper the next day is a secondary source because the reporter who wrote the story did not actually witness it. The reporter is presenting a way of understanding the accident or an interpretation.

**From North Park University, History Department,*
<http://campus.northpar.,edu/history//Classes/Basics/UsingSources.html>

However, the distinctions between primary and secondary sources can be ambiguous. An individual document may be a primary source in one context and a secondary source in another. Time is a defining element. For example, a recent newspaper article is not usually a primary source; but a newspaper article from the 1860's may be a primary source for civil war research.

**From CBB Library and IT Consortium,*
<http://www.cbbnet.org/teaching/sources.html>