



Primary, Secondary, and Tertiary Sources

Primary, secondary, and tertiary are different types of sources that are used in research. All of these sources can be extremely beneficial, but it is important to be able to understand the differences and restrictions.

Primary Sources

Primary sources are a first-hand account (for example: diaries, letters, and artifacts). Think of a witness at the scene of a crime; that's exactly what a primary source is. In research, ensuring you are studying primary sources means you are studying the original material and not a distorted copy or interpretation. However, it is important to remember that since primary sources are a firsthand account, they limit the source to one perspective and potential bias.

Secondary Sources

Secondary sources are accounts that are built on primary sources with evaluation or commentary (for example: newspaper articles, biographies, and documentaries). These are your analysis papers using primary sources. For example, reporters go to a scene and talk to witnesses, but the stories they write will be secondary sources. These are not necessarily less reliable than primary sources, but they are not firsthand accounts. Secondary sources can reveal biases in primary sources or, by adding a new perspective, potentially distort the original.

Tertiary Sources

Tertiary sources include both primary and secondary sources (for example: textbooks, bibliographies, and encyclopedias). However, these are less likely to be used in research because they compile and condense a lot of research into one place. The best example is a textbook; most contain original documents but also provide scholarly interpretation and commentary that include historical context and potential bias. Some textbooks will be secondary sources, depending on the material included, but they are often tertiary sources.

For more information on sources, make an appointment with a [writing tutor](#). Appointments are available in person at the [Student Success Center](#) or online.

Adapted from the University of Louisville Writing Center.