Primary, Secondary & Tertiary Sources Guide

Introduction

Sources of information are generally categorized as primary, secondary or tertiary depending on their originality and their proximity to the source or origin. For example, scientific information moves through a dissemination cycle. Initially, findings might be communicated informally before being formally published as a primary source. Once published, they might be commented upon by others in secondary sources.

The designations of primary, secondary and tertiary differ between disciplines or subjects, particularly between what can generally be defined as the sciences and the humanities. Primary sources for critics studying the literature of the Second World War are different from those for a research scientist investigating a new drug for arthritis. The critic's primary sources are the poems, stories, and films of the era. The research scientist's primary sources are the results of laboratory tests and the medical records of patients treated with the drug.

Primary sources

Definitions of a Primary source:
Primary sources are original materials on which research is based. They present original thinking, report on discoveries, or share new information. They are usually the first formal appearance of results (for example, the first publication of the results of scientific investigations is a primary source). They present information in its original form, neither interpreted nor condensed nor evaluated by other writers. They are from the time period (for example, something written close to when what it is recording happened is likely to be a primary source.)

Some examples of Primary sources:
Scientific journal articles reporting experimental research results; Proceedings of meetings, conferences and symposia; Technical reports; Dissertations or theses (may also be secondary); Patents; Communications on e-mail, listservs, and newsgroups.

Secondary sources

Definitions of a Secondary source:
Secondary sources are less easily defined than primary sources. What some define as a secondary source, others define as a tertiary source. A newspaper article is a primary source if it reports events, but a secondary source if it analyses and comments on those events. In science, secondary sources are those which review, compare, contrast, repackage, reorganise, interpret, summarise, index or otherwise “add value” to the new information reported in the primary literature. Secondary sources are works which are one or more steps removed from the event, or information they refer to, being written after the fact with the benefit of hindsight.

Some examples of Secondary sources:
Review articles and literature reviews; Works of criticism and interpretation; Textbooks (may also be tertiary); Biographical works; Commentaries; History; Journal articles, particularly in disciplines other than science (may also be primary); Monographs (other than fiction and autobiography); Newspaper and popular magazine articles (may also be primary).

Tertiary Sources

Definitions of a Tertiary source:
This is the most problematic category of all. Fortunately, you will rarely be expected to differentiate between secondary and tertiary sources. These are works which list, index, organize, primary and secondary resources in a specific subject area, or materials in which the information from secondary sources has been "digested" - reformatted and condensed, to put it into a convenient, easy-to-read form.

Some examples of Tertiary sources:
Almanacs and fact books; Dictionaries and encyclopaedias (may also be secondary), Guidebooks, manuals etc.; Handbooks and data compilations (may also be secondary); Indexing and abstracting tools used to locate primary & secondary sources (may also be secondary); Textbooks (may also be secondary); Bibliographies (may also be secondary); Chronologies.