

How to Distinguish Between Primary & Secondary Resources

U.S. Conn Library

Whether conducting research in the social sciences, humanities, arts, or natural sciences, the ability to distinguish between **primary** and **secondary source material** is essential. Basically, this distinction illustrates the degree to which the author of a piece is removed from the actual event being described, informing the reader as to whether the author is reporting impressions *first hand* (or is first to record these immediately following an event), or conveying the experiences and opinions of others—that is, *second hand*.

PRIMARY SOURCES

These are **contemporary accounts** of an event, written by someone who experienced or witnessed the event in question. These **original documents** are not about another document or account.

Humanities

- Diaries, journals, and letters
- Newspaper and magazine articles (factual accounts written soon after the fact and not as historical accounts)
- Government records (census, marriage, military)
- Photographs, maps, postcards, posters
- Recorded or transcribed speeches
- Interviews with participants or witnesses (e.g., The Civil Right Movement)
- Interviews with people who lived during a particular time (e.g., genocide in Rwanda)
- Songs, Plays, novels, stories
- Paintings, drawings, and sculptures

Sciences

- Published results of research studies
- Published results of scientific experiments
- Published results of clinical trials
- Proceedings of conferences and meetings

SECONDARY SOURCES

The function of these is to **interpret primary sources**, and so can be described as at least one step removed from the event or phenomenon under review. Secondary source materials, then, interpret, assign values to, conjecture upon, and draw conclusions about the events reported in primary sources.

Humanities

- Biographies
- Histories
- Literary Criticism
- Book, Art, and Theater Reviews
- Newspaper articles that interpret

Sciences

- Publications about the significance of research or experiments
- Analysis of a clinical trial
- Review of the results of several experiments or trials

EXAMPLES

	Primary Source	Secondary Source
Literature	“Song of Myself” (Poem)	Journal article about the poem’s historical importance
Psychology	Results of clinical trial to treat ADD by modifying diet	Book about ways to treat childhood ADD without drugs
Politics and Government	U.S. Census Statistics	Book about suburban population changes in U.S.
History	Recorded interview with Choctaw American Indian	Journal article about Native Americans who served in WWII
Social Science	<i>Diary of Anne Frank</i>	Book about diaries kept during the Holocaust
Art	Photographs by Diane Arbus	Magazine article about 20th century female photographers

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