

**Primary, Secondary &  
Tertiary Sources**

By Pierre de Montereau

## Primary, Secondary & Tertiary Sources

### Introduction

Sources of information are generally categorised as primary, secondary or tertiary depending on their originality and their proximity to the source or origin.

The designations of primary, secondary and tertiary differ between disciplines or subjects, particularly between the sciences and the humanities.

Primary sources for the critic studying literature of the Second World War are different from those of 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

#### Some definitions of primary sources:

- Primary sources are original materials on which other research is based
- They are usually the first formal appearance of results in the print or electronic literature
- They present information in its original form, neither interpreted nor condensed nor evaluated by other writers.
- They are from the time period (for example, accounts by an eyewitness or the first recorder of an event, in written or other form or something written close to when what it is recording happened is likely to be a primary source.)
- Primary sources present original thinking, report on discoveries, or share new information.
- Artefacts such as arrowheads, pottery, furniture, and buildings.

#### 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
- sets of data, such as census statistics
- works of literature (such as poems and fiction)
- diaries
- autobiographies
- interviews, surveys and fieldwork
- letters and correspondence
- speeches
- newspaper articles (may also be secondary)
- government documents
- photographs and works of art
- original documents (such as birth certificate or trial transcripts)
- Internet communications or e-mail, listservs, and newsgroups
- minutes of meetings
- news footage

## Secondary Sources

### Some Definitions of Secondary Sources

Secondary sources are less easily defined than primary sources. What some define as a secondary source, others define as a tertiary source.

Nor is it always easy to distinguish primary from secondary sources. 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 simplify the process of finding and evaluating the primary literature. They tend to be works, which repackage, reorganise, reinterpret, summarise, index or otherwise “add value” to the new information reported in the primary literature.

### More generally, secondary sources

- describe, interpret, analyse and evaluate the primary sources
- comment on and discuss the evidence provided by primary sources
- are works, which have 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:

- bibliographies (may also be tertiary)
- biographical works
- commentaries
- dictionaries and encyclopedias (may also be tertiary)
- dissertations or theses (more usually primary)
- handbooks and data compilations (may also be tertiary)
- history
- indexing and abstracting tools used to locate primary & secondary sources (may also be tertiary)
- journal articles, particularly in disciplines other than science (may also be primary)
- monographs (other than fiction and autobiography)
- newspaper and magazine articles (may also be primary)
- review articles and literature reviews
- textbooks (may also be tertiary)
- treatises
- works of criticism and interpretation

## Tertiary Sources

This is the most problematic category of all. Fortunately, you will rarely be expected to differentiate between secondary and tertiary sources.

### Some Definitions of Tertiary Sources

- works which list primary and secondary resources in a specific subject area
- works which index, organise and compile citations to, and show you how to use, secondary (and sometimes primary) sources.

- 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
- bibliographies (may also be secondary)
- chronologies
- dictionaries and encyclopedias (may also be secondary)
- directories
- 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)

**Some comparative examples of primary, secondary and tertiary sources**

<b>DISCIPLINE</b>	<b>PRIMARY</b>	<b>SECONDARY</b>	<b>TERTIARY</b>
<b>ART</b>	Original artwork	Article critiquing the work	Art Index
<b>ARTEFACTS</b>	Found at Dig Site or in a Museum	A Picture of the Artifact, Information of the Artifact, Dimension, Think of its Use, etc.	Artefacts Bibliography, Artifact Index, etc.
<b>ENGINEERING</b>	Patent	Derwent Patents Index	Guide to using patent literature
<b>HISTORY</b>	Explorer's diary	Biography of the explorer	
<b>LITERATURE</b>	Poem	Treatise on poetry	
<b>SCIENCE</b>	Journal article reporting original coral research	1. Biological Abstracts 2. Review recent of coral research	1. Biological Abstracts
<b>THEATRE</b>	Video of a performance	Review of the performance	Chronology of the play
<b>PSYCHOLOGY</b>	Notes taken by a clinical psychologist	Monograph on the condition	Dictionary of psychology

## **Research Information**

### **Introduction**

Researching is a good way to get excellent information. Research is a way to touch the past and to satisfy your curiosity. The challenge is the more common anything was the less information seems to be available. There are different ways of researching including Books, Museums, the World Wide Web, and the list goes on.

### **Books**

You can find books at your local, colleges, and university. Interlibrary loan (ILL) are a great resources. Libraries, either local, college or university, can order a fortune in rare and obscure books for you free or for a nominal charge. Sometimes you do not even need to be a current student. Many libraries extend lending privileges to alumni or community members. Call your local branch for more information on ILL policies and availability.

### **Museums**

Museums are wonderful sources for primary documentation. Even local museums can bring in traveling exhibits and admittance fees are generally reasonable. Some forbid the use of cameras, so it is a good idea to check policy before visiting. If you are fortunate to be on good terms with the curator, it might be possible to obtain a closer look at some of the exhibits.

Artefacts are a primary source. They have information on where it was found, and any other information, like measurements, etc.

Textiles do not generally hold up well. Most textiles found are attached to metal items like brooches, which will preserve the area near the metal better than the other area of the textile. Another methods that will preserve textiles is a bog but the tannin can interfere with accurate carbon dating and mask signs of dyeing.

Check the fine print. A replica however carefully researched and reproduced is still a replica. Museums will use these and label them as such, commonly when setting up displays. Forgeries and hoaxes can be done so well that even the curators are fooled. This is especially true if the hoax is also several hundred years old.

## Researching on the Web

### Introduction

Many people research information on the Web. There are personal, business, group, guild, college and university web sites and the list goes on. Use caution. There is a lot of information available and some of it is not reliable. Double-check your findings and your sources. A site published by a university or research foundation has more creditability than a personal site. If you plan on citing a web site, get permission from the owner. There are copyright laws to be considered. It is the same for books and articles.

### How do you know the web sites that have the information are correct?

There are a couple of ways that is a reliable as follows:

Libraries, college and university web sites

- has excellent information and are a good source.

Personal, business, group, guild, etc.

- Cross check sources from one web sites to another and if they all have the same information then they are a good source.
- Go to the Bibliography/Reference and write down the information, then check if the books, newspaper articles, etc. exist. If it exists, and has similar information, then the web sites is a good source.

Some Web Sites that will be not reliable as follows:

- Open Editable Web Sites Ex. Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. It has good information and can be cross check but any one can edit the information at anytime.

### Web Search Engines

Web search engines provide an interface to search for information on the Web.

Information may consist of web pages, images and other types of files.

Some search engines also mine data available in newsgroups, databases, or open directories. Unlike Web directories, which are maintained by human editors, search engines operate algorithmically or are a mixture of algorithmic and human input.

A search engine is an information retrieval system designed to help find information stored on a web site. Search engines help to minimize the time required to find information. Some of the common Search Engines are Google.ca and Yahoo.com.

Learn how to use the advanced search features in your favorite search engine. Three to five words should give you a manageable return for your efforts. When you search for the information, you should have a log so you know what the search word(s) is, what web search engine, date and the results so that if you need to go back, you can. Also, if you go into a web site and it has good information. You should put that information in the log as well including the Web Address, Title, Date, and a Brief Description.