

## Primary & Secondary Sources

### Primary Sources

**A primary source is a first-hand account by someone who experienced or witnessed an event.** Primary sources can be described as those sources that are closest to the origin of the information. These sources are records of events or evidence as they are first described or actually happened without any interpretation or commentary. Primary sources display original thinking, report on new discoveries, or share fresh information.

*Primary sources can include:*

- Historical documents (e.g. Bill of Rights) and other original documents
- Newspaper reports by reporters who witnessed an event or who quote people who did
- Speeches, diaries, letters and interviews from people involved
- Survey data, such as census or economic statistics
- Photographs, video, or audio that capture an event
- First publication of a scientific study
- Original artwork
- Autobiographies

→ **Primary sources are appropriate to directly quote in a paper** (even when contained in a secondary source).

### Secondary Sources

**Secondary sources are one step removed from primary sources, though they often quote or otherwise use primary sources.** These sources are written or reported at some point after an event occurred by someone other than the originator. They can cover the same topic, but **the most important distinction is that there is usually an added layer of interpretation and analysis.**

*Secondary sources can include:*

- Most books about a topic
- Scholarly or other articles about a topic, especially by people not directly involved
- Literary criticism, reviews of law and legislation, political analyses and commentaries
- Analysis or interpretation of data
- Documentaries (some will include primary source photos/videos)
- Biographies

→ **Not commonly directly quoted in a paper** (secondary sources are more commonly paraphrased, unless quoting a primary source within the secondary source).

*A reflection on primary sources:* Instead of asking *IF* a particular source is a primary source, it might be more useful to ask *WHEN* that source would be a primary source; see explanation here [LOC](#).

Information above was compiled from: [UMass Boston](#), [Furman University](#), [Monmouth College](#), [SUNY Empire](#), [University of Minnesota](#), and [OSLIS](#) (for more particulars & examples, please use these links)

**Additionally, Tertiary Sources may also be a consideration.** The use of tertiary sources is relative to the discipline/assignment: generally tertiary sources are even further removed from a primary source, summarizing or synthesizing research in secondary sources. These are sources that index, abstract, organize, compile, or list other sources. Tertiary sources are usually not credited to a particular author. *Note:* Check with your teacher if you need help deciphering secondary vs. tertiary sources.

*Tertiary sources are frequently a starting point, but are not generally cited sources; they include:*

- Dictionaries and general encyclopedias like Britannica, Wikipedia, and World Book (note: subject-specific encyclopedias are usually secondary sources)
- Almanacs, directories, guidebooks, manuals, handbooks, and bibliographies
- Textbooks (note: some are considered secondary, especially those with authors)