

Distinguishing Between Primary, Secondary and Tertiary Sources

As information progresses through its lifecycle it undergoes a number of transformations. Broadly speaking, we can say that three main categories emerge out of this process: **primary**, **secondary** and **tertiary** sources of information.

Primary sources of information present data that has not been analyzed or interpreted in any way; these are original research, eyewitness accounts, and creative works from the time period, usually presented in their original form and serve to help interpret an event. Examples: newspaper articles, speeches, photographs, interviews, internet communications or other forms of correspondence, sets of data, patents, conference proceedings, autobiographies.

Secondary sources take the information from the primary source and analyze, summarize, discuss, interpret, evaluate, report or build on it in some way; are one or more steps removed from the event or information they refer to. Examples: works of criticism, commentaries, journal articles (particularly outside the sciences), history, biographies, review articles, popular magazine articles.

Tertiary sources are general materials that in some way combine, collate, index, organize, or condense the information from primary and secondary sources; are once removed in time from secondary sources. Examples: sources that summarize a field of research such as encyclopedias or survey texts, research tools such as journal indexes, almanacs, chronologies, guidebooks, manuals, handbooks.

This table gives some indication of the types of material associated with the different levels of information in different disciplines

Discipline	Primary	Secondary	Tertiary
Art	Original artwork	Article critiquing the work	Art Index
Business	A market survey	A journal article discussing the effect of government policy on consumer attitudes.	A text book discussing different methodological approaches to market research
Engineering	Research findings on concrete corrosion	Journal article discussing the corrosive effects of water on concrete	EiCompendex index
Health Sciences	Data from a study investigating the health benefits of walking for half an hour every day	A journal article reporting the methodology, results & conclusion of this study	An encyclopedia of fitness and health
History	Explorer's diary or letter	Biography of the explorer	A history textbook
Natural Sciences	Conference paper announcing new findings in genome research	Book on human genetics	Biological Abstracts (scientific indexing and abstracting database)
Psychology	Notes taken by a clinical psychologist, or an interview	Research report	PsycInfo index
Science	Journal article reporting on original chemistry research	Review of recent research	Handbook of tables for chemical analysis
Theatre Arts	A play	A critical guide to the play	A dictionary of theatre terminology