

## Distinguishing Between Primary, Secondary, and Tertiary Sources

As information progresses through its lifecycle it undergoes a number of transformations. Three main categories of information sources emerge out of this process: **primary**, **secondary** and **tertiary**.

**Primary** sources present information in its original form that has not been analyzed or interpreted after the fact; in historical research, primary sources are information sources dating from the time period being studied. Examples: newspaper articles, eyewitness accounts, speeches, letters, diaries, photographs, interviews, sets of data, patents, autobiographies.

**Secondary** sources take the information from the primary source and analyze, summarize, discuss, interpret, evaluate, report or build on it in some way; thus secondary sources 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), biographies, scholarly books.

**Tertiary** sources are general materials that in some way combine, collate, index, organize, or condense the information from primary and secondary sources; they are once removed in time from secondary sources. Examples: sources that summarize a field of research such as encyclopedias or textbooks, research tools such as article databases (such as Expanded Academic ASAP), almanacs, chronologies, guidebooks, manuals, handbooks.

This table gives some indication of the types of material considered to be primary, secondary, and tertiary sources in different disciplines.

Discipline	Primary	Secondary	Tertiary
<b>Art</b>	Original artwork	Article critiquing the work	Art Index Retrospective
<b>Business</b>	A market survey	A journal article discussing the effect of government policy on consumer attitudes.	A textbook discussing different methodological approaches to market research
<b>Engineering</b>	Research findings on concrete corrosion	Journal article discussing the corrosive effects of water on concrete	Compendex index
<b>Health Sciences</b>	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
<b>History</b>	Explorer's diary or letter	Biography of the explorer	A history textbook
<b>Natural Sciences</b>	Conference paper announcing new findings in genome research	Book on human genetics	Biological Abstracts (scientific indexing and abstracting database)
<b>Psychology</b>	Notes taken by a clinical psychologist, or an interview	Research report	PsycInfo index
<b>Science</b>	Journal article reporting on original chemistry research	Review of recent research	Handbook of tables for chemical analysis
<b>Theatre Arts</b>	A play	A critical guide to the play	A dictionary of theatre terminology