

Evaluating Sources

In academic writing, there are three levels of sources. Primary sources are first-hand accounts of a topic from people or things that had a direct connection to it; secondary sources provide an analysis or summary of primary sources but introduce diverging interpretations of information, and tertiary sources occur when a secondary source cites information from a primary source, i.e., a source within a source. Each of these types of sources possess their own rules for appropriate incorporation.

Primary Sources

Primary sources are immediate, first-hand accounts of a topic from people that had a direct connection to it. Primary sources are not modified by interpretation and only provide an example of an original thought or newly established information. Primary sources equally provide concise evidence for an initiated argument. When considering the authenticity of a primary source, there are some general aspects to look for that help in determining whether a source is 'primary'.

How to Identify a Primary Source?

Think of a primary source as an established first-hand account of a given event or subject matter. An uncompromised account that serves as direct evidence for an event in time is considered primary in representation regardless of their format or material. For example, letters, diaries, interviews, video recordings, oral histories, memoirs, autobiographies, speeches, government publications, films, or even photographs are considered primary sources. Primary sources are most effective at supporting an initial argument formed within an academic essay, offering uncompromised data that is not open to interpretation. The key thing to remember is if a source establishes a first-hand account or delivers unique information, it is a primary source.

Types of Primary Sources	Examples
Artwork	Giacomo Balla "Dynamism of a Dog on a Leash"
Databases	Census Bureau "Total United States Population Chart"
Diary	<i>Leonardo da Vinci's Diary</i> (1452-1519)
Interview	President Obama, Howard Buffet, 60 minutes
Letter	Malcolm X's "Al-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz" Letter from Mecca
Original Research	Current Biology "A Feathered Dinosaur Tail with Primitive Plumage Trapped in Mid-Cretaceous Amber"
Photographs	Henri Cartier-Bresson's "Man Jumping the Puddle (1930)"
Poem	Walt Whitman "Song of Myself (<i>Leaves of Grass</i> 1891-1892)"
Speech	Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream"
Treaty	<i>The Treaty of Paris</i> (1783)

Primary Source Analysis

While evaluating primary resources, it is important to consider if the given subject matter is relevant to the scope of your research. To determine if a primary source is compatible with your research, there are five general questions that aid in establishing the relevancy of a primary source.

- **Content** - What is the main idea of the observed content?
- **Context** - What is going on in the world, the country, the region, or the locality when the information was first created?
- **Connections** - Are you able to associate the primary source to other instances that have come from researching a topic?
- **Communication** – Does the source communicate an original and direct point of view?
- **Conclusions** - How does the primary source contribute to the understanding of the time when it was written?

Secondary Sources

Secondary sources are one step removed from primary sources, though they often quote or otherwise use primary sources as a reference point. They can cover the same topic but add a layer of interpretation and analysis. Essentially, secondary sources provide an analysis or summary of primary sources but offer diverging interpretations. Secondary sources are appropriate to use when bolstering your argument by providing an alternative point-of-view on an established subject. Well-grounded alternative perspectives that have the foundation of solid primary sources are effective in strengthening an argument. When evaluating secondary sources, it is critical to remember common misconceptions when analyzing core information. Secondary resources are interpretations of information that has been reintroduced in a new way.

Types of Secondary Sources	Examples
Analysis or interpretation of data	Ana Maria Colubi, Erricos Kontoghiorghes, Byeong Park, "Computational Statistics & Data Analysis"
Article Critiquing a piece of art	Robert Root-Bernstein, "On Paradigms and Revolutions in Science and Art: The Challenge of Interpretation"
Biography	Drew L. Crichton, "Princess Diana: A Biography of the Princess of Wales"
Book about a specific subject	John Farndon, "The Illustrated Guide to Rocks & Minerals"
Most books about a topic	William Nickels, James McHugh, and Susan McHugh, "Understanding Business 12 th Edition"
Dissertation	Joseph G. Dreiss, "The Art of Leon Golub (1946-1978)"
Documentaries (though they often include photos or video portions that can be considered primary sources)	David Attenborough, "Attenborough and the Giant Elephant"
Essay on a treaty	Paul Neff Garber, "The Gadsden Treaty"

Scholarly or other articles about a topic, especially by people not directly involved.	R. A. Pielke Jr, C. Landsea, M. Mayfield, J. Layer, and R. Pasch, "Hurricanes and Global Warming"
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When a Primary Source Is Considered a Secondary Source

Whether a source is considered a primary or secondary source often depends upon the topic and its use. A biology textbook would be considered a secondary source since it describes and interprets the subject but makes no original contribution to it. On the other hand, if the topic is science education and the history of textbooks, textbooks could be used as a primary source to look at how they have changed over time. Moreover, if a secondary source, such as an academic journal, uses primary source material, such as photographs and quotations, then those items are considered primary within a secondary source.

Examples of Primary Sources	Examples of Secondary Sources
Artwork	Article critiquing the piece of art
Diary	Book about the specific subject
Interview	Biography
Letters	Dissertation
Performance	Review of play
Poem	Treatise on a particular genre of poetry
Treaty	Essay on a treaty

Tertiary Sources

Tertiary sources occur when a primary or secondary source are referenced within another work and do not provide additional analysis or interpretations of the given information. For example, textbooks commonly reference material that is not original and presents that information without altering the intended meaning or purpose of the information. Tertiary sources are most appropriately utilized when the record of primary sources is otherwise missing, such as a translation of the Egyptian *Dead Sea Scrolls*, which were originally recorded in hieroglyphs, or when it is otherwise specified by a professor who assigns a textbook reading with a discussion board prompt.

Examples of Tertiary Sources
The Little Seagull 4th Edition – Sections on sample reports
Biology Textbook – A comprehensive explanation of a cell cycle with an accompanying diagram
History Textbook – Photographs and quotes from Dr. Martin Luther King’s “I Have a Dream” speech.
Canvas Posts from Professors – Lecture PowerPoints and notes from class.

Additional Resources

For further information related to primary sources, see the Academic Center for Excellence’s handouts: [Guide to Writing a Research Paper](#), [Incorporating Sources into Research Writing](#), [Research Paper Process Worksheet](#).

Online resources are also available on Germanna’s Academic Center for Excellence’s Writing Resources webpage at <https://www.germannna.edu/academic-center-for-excellence/writing-resources/>. For more information or to schedule an appointment, contact the Academic Center for Excellence’s Locust Grove center at **(540) 423-9148**, the Fredericksburg center at **(540) 891-3017**, or the Barbara J. Fried Center in Stafford at **(540) 834-1993** workshop.

Primary Source Checklist:

<p>Source Name: <input type="text"/></p> <p>Source Location: <input type="text"/></p> <p>Source Type: <input type="text"/></p>	<p>Is the information a primary account?</p> <p>Is the information modified by interpretation?</p> <p>Is the information newly established?</p>
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Secondary Source Checklist:

<p>Source Name: <input type="text"/></p> <p>Source Location: <input type="text"/></p> <p>Source Type: <input type="text"/></p>	<p>Is the information a secondhand account?</p> <p>Is the information modified by interpretation?</p> <p>Does the information provide an alternative perspective?</p>
<p>Source Name: <input type="text"/></p> <p>Source Location: <input type="text"/></p> <p>Source Type: <input type="text"/></p>	<p>Is the information a secondhand account?</p> <p>Is the information modified by interpretation?</p> <p>Does the information provide an alternative perspective?</p>
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