A Guide to Primary, Secondary & Tertiary/Reference Sources

When conducting research, the ability to distinguish between types of information sources is a very useful skill.

This handout explains how to distinguish between primary, secondary and tertiary/reference sources and you how to use them appropriately in your research:

1) General Characteristics & Key Differences

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<tr>
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<th>PRIMARY</th>
<th>SECONDARY</th>
<th>TERTIARY</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Definition &amp; Common Formats</strong></td>
<td>Original materials presented firsthand and unfiltered, without interpretation or evaluation: Historical artifacts, diaries, records, newspapers, letters Works of art, literature, and music</td>
<td>Sources that comment, discuss, analyze, evaluate, and/or interpret information contained within primary and tertiary sources Academic journals and books Textbooks (may also be considered tertiary) Commentaries and reviews</td>
<td>Overview or summary that compile, synthesize, and combine both primary and secondary sources Encyclopedias, dictionaries, atlases, handbooks Annotated bibliographies, indexes, chronologies</td>
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<td><strong>Currency &amp; Proximity</strong></td>
<td>Tend to come first in the publication cycle; close to or immediate to the time period and/or event(s)</td>
<td>Tend to come second in the publication cycle; vary from close to or far-removed from originating time period and/or event(s)</td>
<td>Tend to come last in the publication cycle; far-removed from originating time period and/or event(s)</td>
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<td><strong>Purpose, Point of View &amp; Tone</strong></td>
<td>Often fits in one of the following categories: a) Subjective, first-person narration; b) Creative writing; c) Neutral, detached reporting</td>
<td>• Written in argumentative and analytical tone • Typically builds on past and/or current discourse • Often aims to counter, extend, and/or supplant previous works</td>
<td>• Factual, objective and concise with emphasis on distilling multiple sources • Broad, general focus • Lacks analysis and critique</td>
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## 2) Typical Formats

<table>
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<tr>
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<th>Secondary</th>
<th>Tertiary/Reference</th>
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| • Diaries, memoirs, and autobiography  
• Letters and personal correspondence  
• Original works of art and literature (i.e. painting, sculpture, film, novels)  
• Patents, raw data, and lab reports | • Articles in scholarly/academic journals (peer-reviewed studies, editorials, reviews)  
• Articles in trade/professional journals  
• Scholarly/academic or popular/mainstream books of criticism and interpretation  
• Academic theses and dissertations | • Abstracts and bibliographies  
• Atlases, timelines and chronologies  
• Dictionaries and glossaries  
• Encyclopedias  
• Handbooks, guidebooks, and manuals |

## 3) Examples by Discipline/Subject Area

Definitions may vary according to the specific context in which a source is being used; often, this is dependent on the subject area or discipline of study.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Subject</th>
<th>Primary</th>
<th>Secondary</th>
<th>Tertiary/Reference</th>
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</table>
| **Victorian Literature** | • Novels, plays, poems and/or correspondence written in the Victorian era | • Scholarly articles and books analyzing literary works, culture, history and/or politics of the Victorian era  
• Formal biographies of Victorian period writers | A reference work or encyclopedia with coverage of the social, political, and intellectual landscape of the Victorian period, for example:  
➢ Encyclopedia of the Victorian Era |
| **Medicine** | • A chart or report of findings from a trial for a new drug treatment | • Scholarly, peer-reviewed research studies about the condition and/or similar drug treatments | Dictionary or index of drug treatments, for example:  
➢ Canadian Pharmacist’s Association’s *Compendium of Pharmaceuticals & Specialties* (e-CPS) |
| **Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)** | • Case notes or observations taken by a clinical psychologist  
• Firsthand accounts by sufferers of PTSD | • Scholarly research studies, textbooks, and books about PTSD | Textbook or manual of psychological disorders, for example:  
➢ *American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5) |