



## Primary vs. Secondary Sources

Research for major projects will incorporate both primary and secondary sources. *The Everyday Writer* describes primary sources as “firsthand knowledge” while “[s]econdary sources are descriptions or interpretations of primary sources” (p. 146).

What is considered a primary source may vary depending on the purpose of the research. For example interpretive books and articles, literary criticism, reviews, etc., usually considered secondary, will be primary sources if you are researching the critic or how attitudes and interpretation of a literary/art work or an event has changed over time.

FIELD	PRIMARY SOURCE	SECONDARY
<b>All Fields</b>	Raw data gathered by you or others	Comparisons that interpret or draw conclusions about the data
	Your own field notes, experiments, surveys, or interviews that you conduct	Reviews of the literature and other guides to help you prepare for experiments, surveys, etc.
		Textbooks, scholarly, and popular works about a field or topic
<b>History</b>	Treaties, laws, constitutions, census data, other government data	Journal articles, books, encyclopedia or textbook articles about such documents
	Journals, diaries, letters, speeches, autobiographies of people involved in the event	When reflections on events by people not directly involved
	Photographs, film, newspaper & magazine firsthand reporting of the actual event	Interpretive articles, or historical reflections
	Contemporary artifacts – actual items used at the time	Photographs or drawings of artifacts
<b>Literature &amp; Music</b>	Texts of novels, plays, poems Musical scores	Reviews, Criticism or introductory/explanatory material
	Author or composer’s notes correspondence or autobiographies	Biographies of author, musician
	Author’s recorded readings of own works Performances of plays or films/videos of such performances	Film interpretations of novels, plays <i>[would be a primary source if your research topic is the musician, conductor, actor or director or how a work is interpreted differently over time]</i>
	Musical performances / recordings / films/videos of live performances	<i>May be considered interpretations of the composer’s work but are a definitely a primary source if your research topic is the musician, conductor or how a work is interpreted differently over time</i>
<b>Art</b>	Original painting, sculpture, etching, etc.	Reproduction of art works in print, film or digital medium
	Artist’s sketch books, diaries, letters, etc.	Biographical and critical books or articles about the art/artist
	Original building, architectural plans, artifacts	Photographs of buildings and architectural details; books and articles interpreting and critiquing architects, styles, etc.

FIELD	PRIMARY SOURCE	SECONDARY
<b>Natural Sciences &amp; Social Sciences</b>	Original reports of primary research published or presented at meetings by the individuals doing the study – includes data and methodology – generally in scholarly journals	Reviews of the literature comparing several studies; editorials or reporting about primary research
	Books, articles, documents from scientists, theorists and other major figures in a field	Criticism and interpretation of or studies on the significance of such documents and people
<b>Religion &amp; Philosophy</b>	Sacred texts – particularly in original language – Hebrew Old Testament; Greek New Testament, Arabic Koran, etc. <i>Standard English translations are generally accepted as primary for undergraduates</i>	Commentaries on the texts Synopsis or excerpts of verses of such texts
	Books and treatises by philosophers or theologians	Interpretation and criticism of or studies on the significance of such documents and people

**Additional places to learn about primary and secondary sources:**

Primary and Secondary Sources from Bowling Green University Libraries

<http://www.bgsu.edu/colleges/library/assistance/page41012.html>

Defining Primary and Secondary Sources

By Michael Eamon, historian and archivist, Library and Archives Canada

<http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/education/008-3010-e.html>

Primary, Secondary & Tertiary Sources

James Cook University Library

[http://cms.jcu.edu.au/libcomp/resources/era/JCUPRD\\_030412](http://cms.jcu.edu.au/libcomp/resources/era/JCUPRD_030412)

Lafayette University Libraries

<http://library.lafayette.edu/help/primary>

What is a Primary Source – discipline based examples

How to Evaluate a Primary Source – mainly historical ones

**Books to consult:**

Lunsford, A.A. (2005). *The everyday writer* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's.

Mann, T. (2005). *The Oxford guide to library research*. New York: Oxford University Press