

## Primary, Secondary, and Tertiary Sources

Sources selected for use in research can usually be categorized according to types: primary, secondary, and tertiary. Primary sources provide the most direct evidence of a topic being developed in a research project and should generally be given high importance for inclusion in the research process. Secondary sources provide analysis and discussion by researchers who have examined primary sources and seek to explore their significance. Tertiary sources provide overviews and synopses of issues raised by secondary sources or may help a researcher identify primary and secondary sources. All play a role in helping a researcher develop a project.

### Primary Sources

Primary sources are critical to any research project, unless, of course, the primary purpose is to produce a survey of existing literature on a topic. What is considered primary varies from discipline to discipline. For example, a primary source for literature would include writings, speeches, and other direct communications from the author of the work being studied. A researcher doing a critical analysis of the influence of folk literature on J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* trilogy would rely on the trilogy, itself, any written documents by Tolkien in which he discussed the trilogy, any correspondence between Tolkien and others which would directly contribute to an understanding of the trilogy, and any folk literature that could be directly tied to the story, settings, or characters in Tolkien's work. All of these would be considered primary sources: they reflect the *Lord of the Rings* directly, sources that influenced the work of literature, and the author's commentary on the writing. As you can see, the closer the material is to the original work of literature, the more likely it is to be considered a primary source.

Primary sources for history will include materials such as letters, interviews, eyewitness accounts, newspaper articles, and autobiographical sketches. A researcher looking into differences in how the Northern and Southern presses reported the Battle of Antietam during the Civil War would need to consider eyewitness accounts of the battle and its direct aftermath, correspondence from soldiers involved in the battle, military reports of the battle, and, of course, newspaper accounts of the battle. These are not all of the possible primary sources that could be used but some of the most essential. Additionally, a researcher might also look for any autobiographies or memoirs written by people who were directly involved in the battle. The idea behind seeking out primary sources is to get as close to the historical event as possible.

Primary sources for psychology might include interviews with human subjects who are participating in a study, empirical data gathered during the course of a study, original articles detailing the design, conduct of, and results of a study, and other similar materials. A researcher trying to determine if listening to classical music while studying aids in knowledge retention would design a project to examine students who are studying under various conditions in order to compile data to support or disprove the hypothesis. The data gathered, any interviews with the study participants, and any direct observations made by the investigators of the participants would all be considered primary sources.



Magna Carta

Each discipline will have different types of sources that will be considered primary. One of the key things to consider when you are trying to determine if a source is primary is how close it is to being the original reporting of the topic being researched. The examples above provide a few ideas, but also consider news media, motion pictures, television shows, radio shows, and other media as potential primary sources for research.

### ***Secondary Sources***

Secondary sources are created using primary sources and analyzing those materials in order to discover new aspects or in order to make new connections. Often times, secondary sources find publication in academic journals or in books and provide other researchers with additional resources for inclusion in their own explorations. A typical academic project will begin with a literature review, or a systematic survey of what has been published on a specific topic at the point that the current study is undertaken. Following the literature review, the project will delve into primary sources that can be further explained in light of what has already been written and as a result of the investigator's own interpretations of the primary materials.

In the Tolkien example above, secondary sources would most likely consist of journal articles written by other researchers who have investigated the folk tales/*Lord of the Rings* connection. Additional sources might include biographies of Tolkien that delve into his familiarity with folk literature and books on Tolkien's writing and on folk literature as sources for works of literature. To further distinguish the difference between primary and secondary sources in literature, the secondary sources aim to explain and interpret the primary sources.

Secondary sources that might be used in further researching news reporting on the Battle of Antietam would include books on the Civil War, books on journalism during the Civil War, journal articles about the Battle of Antietam, journal articles on news coverage of Civil war battles, and other related materials. As in the literature example above, the secondary sources for history aim to further explain and interpret the primary sources.

Types of secondary sources that might be used in exploring the utilization of classical music as an aid to study would include journal articles and books that reflect the current state of knowledge on psychological aspects of music and learning. As a run-up to the study outlined above, the investigators would do a comprehensive survey of previous studies that were similar in nature to the planned study.

### ***Tertiary Sources***

Materials categorized as tertiary in nature will include indexes and abstracts, databases, encyclopedias, handbooks, and other similar sources. In most cases, tertiary sources help identify primary and secondary sources for the researcher. In the case of indexes and abstracts, these types of tools are designed specifically to help a researcher identify a wide variety of sources on specific topics. Indexes and abstracts might cover articles from magazines, journals, and newspapers, but they might also provide topical coverage of books, manuscripts, and other sources. Library databases, in most cases, have been created from indexes and abstracts and make it even easier for a researcher to identify sources in a variety of disciplines. Encyclopedias and handbooks might be considered both secondary and tertiary sources. On the one hand, they might provide in-depth articles that interpret and explain primary materials, in which case they can be considered secondary sources. On the other hand, they might provide basic overviews of a variety of topics and serve as tools for identifying primary and secondary sources, in which case they fall more into the category of tertiary works.

**Table – Source Examples**

<b>Subject</b>	<b>Primary</b>	<b>Secondary</b>	<b>Tertiary</b>
History - News Coverage of the Battle of Antietam.	Newspaper articles published at the time of the battle.	Journal articles and books about the battle and about news coverage of Civil War events.	<i>America: History and Life</i> . Encyclopedias of American history and the Civil War.
Literature - Influence of Folk Literature on Tolkien's <i>Lord of the Rings</i>	<i>Lord of the Rings</i> . Tolkien's correspondence. Relevant folk literature.	Journal articles and books about Tolkien's writing and folk literature.	<i>MLA International Bibliography</i> . <i>Humanities Full Text</i> . Literature handbooks. Folk tale encyclopedias.
Music - Eastern musical influences on the music of the Beatles	Beatles albums. Beatles music scores. Interviews with members of the group. Indian music sources. Interviews with Ravi Shankar. <i>Naxos Music Library</i> .	Journal articles and books focusing on the Beatles' music and Eastern influences.	Dictionaries and encyclopedias of music. <i>Humanities Full Text</i> . <i>RILM</i> .
Psychology - Influence of classical music on study	Interviews with subjects in a theoretical study. Data gathered during the course of the study.	Journal articles and books that examine comprehension and influences on comprehension.	<i>PsycInfo</i> . Encyclopedias of learning theory. Handbooks on learning and cognition.
Technology - The use of plastics in highway bridge construction.	Experimental studies examining structural loads on plastic bridge materials. Data gathered during studies. Materials data sheets. Government studies on bridge construction and safety.	Journal articles and books on bridge construction. Articles on structural properties of plastics.	<i>Engineering Village</i> . Construction encyclopedias. Textbooks on bridge construction.
<p><i>Note that in the above examples some sources listed as tertiary will actually also supply secondary sources. The full text databases not only guide the researcher to primary and secondary sources, they also provide the sources directly.</i></p>			