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Types of Sources

Primary sources provide firsthand evidence. This may be something created or documented at the time of an event, including original research (usually published in scholarly journals), diaries, photographs, conference proceedings, criticisms, and newspaper articles. It may also be something documented at a later time, such as autobiographies, memoirs, and oral histories.

This is in contrast to secondary sources, which interpret or analyze information. Secondary sources are often based on primary sources and include reference books, textbooks, and many scholarly journal articles and books.

Another type of source is called a tertiary source. Tertiary sources are publications such as encyclopedias or other compendia that mainly summarize secondary sources. This includes Wikipedia.com and other encyclopedias, directories, and bibliographies used to locate primary and secondary sources.

However, defining a source as primary, secondary, or tertiary actually depends on how you are using the material. A newspaper article may be both primary and secondary. This example is from the University of Maryland:

A magazine article reporting on recent studies linking the reduction of energy consumption to the compact fluorescent light bulb would be a secondary source.

A research article or study proving this would be a primary source.

However, if you were studying how compact fluorescent light bulbs are presented in the popular media, the magazine article could be considered a primary source.

This guide is a tertiary source. Several secondary sources were used to help this writer understand the topic and to gather examples, which may also help *you* to more deeply appreciate the value of using primary sources. Here is a list of resources:

Keeran, P., Moulton-Gertig, S., Levine-Clark, M., Schlotzhauer, N., Gil, E., Brown, C. C., et al. (2007). *Research within the disciplines: Foundations for reference and library instruction*. Lanham, Md: Scarecrow Press.

Mathewson-IGT Knowledge Center. (June 2008). *What is a Primary Source?* Reno, NV: University of Nevada. From <http://www.knowledgecenter.unr.edu/instruction/help/primary.html>.

Primary source. (2009, May 29). In *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. Retrieved May 29, 2009, from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Primary_source.

University of Maryland University Libraries. (2001). Primary, Secondary and Tertiary Sources. In *Guides to Information Resources*. From <http://www.lib.umd.edu/guides/primary-sources.html>.

University Libraries has many primary sources. Please ask a reference librarian for more information. Call the Reference Desk at 316-978-5084 or instant message at wu_knows (yahoo), wuknows2 (AOL), or wu_knows@hotmail.com.