**Types of sources**

It’s difficult to evaluate a source if you’re not sure where to begin. Before getting started, it’s important to establish what genre of research you need. Below is a breakdown of how sources are often separated. Once you recognize the differences in sources, it becomes easier to locate exactly what you need and evaluate whether the sources you find seem credible.

**Scholarly vs. Popular Sources**

Most sources fall into two categories: scholarly and popular. Scholarly sources are written by highly-qualified researchers and have a thorough publication process, which usually involves peer-reviewing and an extensive list of references at the end of the text. Scholarly sources often have a specific audience in mind, most likely other experts in the particular field of study. Examples of scholarly sources include books and academic journals written by scholars and experts.

Popular sources, on the other hand, are written by and intended for a general audience. Popular sources are not peer-reviewed, and they do not usually include a reference list. Examples of popular sources range from some books and magazines to websites and blogs.

If you’re unsure whether the source you’re reading is scholarly or popular, ask yourself these questions:

* Who is the intended audience?
* Does the author have credentials?
* Is the text peer-reviewed?
* Is there a reference list or Works Cited page?

If the source you’re examining fits the above criteria, it is most likely a scholarly source.

When searching for sources, different topics might require more scholarly sources or more popular sources. For example, if you were researching the effects of a certain treatment for cancer patients, you would most likely turn to scholarly sources written by experts. However, if you wanted to examine how different news outlets and social media sites portrayed a recent presidential debate, you would instead turn to popular sources.

Understanding the difference between a scholarly and popular source is a crucial step in evaluating credible sources.

**Primary vs. Secondary Sources**

Just as sources can be scholarly or popular, sources are also divided into primary and secondary.

A primary source is a firsthand or eyewitness account of information by an individual close to the topic. Examples of primary sources include autobiographies, personal correspondence (e.g., diary entries, letters), government documents, works of art and literature, statistics and data, and newspaper articles written by reporters close to the source. Today, even some social media posts are considered primary sources, because they are firsthand accounts of information.

A secondary source is a source that is more removed from an event, usually written after the event has happened. Examples of secondary sources include biographies, interpretation of statistics and data, and anything written after an historical event or analyzing something that already happened (e.g., examining a work of art from 100 years ago).

Depending on your research, you may need more primary or secondary sources. For example, if you wanted to trace the history of whale sightings off the coast of Alaska, you would probably need to find some historical documents that provide firsthand information on whale sightings from a few hundred years ago. However, if you wanted to look at how boating has changed whale migration patterns, you would probably rely on some secondary sources that interpret data and statistics.

When evaluating sources, being able to determine whether it’s primary or secondary is helpful as you continue in your research.

| **Primary sources** |
| --- |
| **Research field** | **Primary source** |
| **History** | * Letters and diaries
* Photographs and video footage
* Official documents and records
* Physical objects
 |
| **Art and literature** | * Novels and poems
* Paintings and art installations
* Films and performances
 |
| **Communication and social studies** | * Interview transcripts
* Recordings of speeches
* Newspapers and magazines
* Social media posts
 |
| **Law and politics** | * Court records
* Legal texts
* Government documents
 |
| **Sciences** | * Empirical studies
* Statistical data
 |

## Primary and secondary source examples

| **Primary and secondary source examples** |
| --- |
| **Primary source** | **Secondary source** |
| Novel | Article analyzing the novel |
| Painting | Exhibition catalog explaining the painting |
| Letters and diaries written by a historical figure | Biography of the historical figure |
| [Essay](https://www.scribbr.com/category/academic-writing/) by a philosopher | Textbook summarizing the philosopher’s ideas |
| Photographs of a historical event | Documentary about the historical event |
| Government documents about a new policy | Newspaper article about the new policy |
| Music recordings | Academic book about the musical style |
| Results of an opinion poll | Blog post interpreting the results of the poll |
| Empirical study | [Literature review](https://www.scribbr.com/dissertation/literature-review/) that cites the study |

### Examples of sources that can be primary or secondary

A secondary source can become a primary source depending on your [research question](https://www.scribbr.com/research-process/research-question-examples/). If the person, context, or technique that produced the source is the main focus of your research, it becomes a primary source.

###### Documentaries

If you are researching the causes of World War II, a recent documentary about the war is a secondary source. But if you are researching the filmmaking techniques used in historical documentaries, the documentary is a primary source.

###### Reviews and essays

If your paper is about the novels of Toni Morrison, a magazine review of one of her novels is a secondary source. But if your paper is about the critical reception of Toni Morrison’s work, the review is a primary source.

###### Newspaper articles

If your aim is to analyze the government’s economic policy, a newspaper article about a new policy is a secondary source. But if your aim is to analyze media coverage of economic issues, the newspaper article is a primary source.

## How to tell if a source is primary or secondary

To determine if something can be used as a primary or secondary source in your research, there are some simple questions you can ask yourself:

* Does this source come from someone directly involved in the events I’m studying (primary) or from another researcher (secondary)?
* Am I interested in [evaluating the source](https://www.scribbr.com/working-with-sources/evaluating-sources/) itself (primary) or only using it for background information (secondary)?
* Does the source provide original information (primary) or does it comment upon information from other sources (secondary)?

## Primary vs secondary sources: which is better?

Most research uses both primary and secondary sources. They complement each other to help you build a convincing argument. Primary sources are more [credible](https://www.scribbr.com/working-with-sources/craap-test/) as evidence, but secondary sources show how your work relates to existing research. [Tertiary sources](https://www.scribbr.com/working-with-sources/tertiary-sources/) are often used in the first, exploratory stage of research.

### What do you use primary sources for?

Primary sources are the foundation of original research. They allow you to:

* Make new discoveries
* Provide credible evidence for your arguments
* Give authoritative information about your topic

If you don’t use any primary sources, your research may be considered unoriginal or unreliable.

### What do you use secondary sources for?

Secondary sources are good for gaining a full overview of your topic and understanding how other researchers have approached it. They often synthesize a large number of primary sources that would be difficult and time-consuming to gather by yourself. They allow you to:

* Gain background information on the topic
* Support or contrast your arguments with other researchers’ ideas
* Gather information from primary sources that you can’t access directly (e.g. private letters or physical documents located elsewhere)

When you conduct a [literature review](https://www.scribbr.com/dissertation/literature-review/) or meta analysis, you can consult secondary sources to gain a thorough overview of your topic. If you want to mention a paper or study that you find cited in a secondary source, seek out the original source and cite it directly.

Remember that all primary and secondary sources must be cited to [avoid plagiarism](https://www.scribbr.com/plagiarism/how-to-avoid-plagiarism/).