

Primary, Secondary and Tertiary Sources

Primary sources are first-hand accounts of events. Primary sources contain information that hasn't yet been interpreted by another person. They are original recordings of research results, memoirs and autobiographies, news stories, interviews, pictures, speeches, works of art, diaries, novels, government documents, raw data and statistics.

Secondary sources are interpretations, summaries or analyses of primary (or other secondary) sources. Secondary sources can be second-hand and/or critical accounts of events including scholarly articles, biographies, commentaries, documentaries, encyclopedia entries, text books, most non-fiction books.

Tertiary sources are simply collections of primary and secondary sources. Examples include almanacs, encyclopedias, bibliographies, indexes, guidebooks, dictionaries, etc.

Primary	Secondary	Tertiary
Student account of shooting at Columbine	Magazine article about teen violence that discusses Columbine	Encyclopedia of Violence and Crime
Poem by Robert Frost	Scholarly article discussing imagery in Frost's poetry	Project Muse, a literary periodical database
Speech by Barack Obama	Blog entry discussing Barack Obama's speech	Book containing Presidential Speeches
Raw data from a chemistry experiment	Article discussing the implications of the data from the research project	Dictionary of Chemistry Terms and Experiments

(Note that it may be difficult to determine whether a particular source is primary or secondary. Depending on its use, a source can be both. For example, a history text book can be a secondary source because it contains interpretations and explanations of events and ideas. But if somebody were researching how many history text books describe the Civil War, that same text book can become a primary source.)