

PRIMARY & SECONDARY SOURCES

A USC Upstate Library Guide

What is the difference between a primary and secondary source?

Primary Source

Primary sources, generally speaking, are original material on a subject; however, the exact definition of primary sources can differ according to the discipline. Historians consider primary sources to be material written by the subject (if a person) or material that was written about a subject by someone who was alive during the time period. The types of primary sources can also vary widely depending on the discipline. The following are some examples of the different types:

(Note: If you are unsure about whether your sources can be considered primary, please check with your professor.)

- Public Records
 - Census Records
 - Church/Synagogue Records
 - Divorce Records
 - Education Records
 - Land Records
 - Military Records
- Personal Papers
 - Journals
 - Diaries
 - Correspondence
- Organization Papers
- Newspaper Articles
- Original Research
- Original Works of Literature

(List taken from-- Horowitz, Lou. *Knowing Where to Look: The Ultimate Guide to Research*. Cincinnati: Writer's Digest, 1984.)

Secondary Source

Secondary sources are ones in which the author gives a second-hand account of the information. For example, many books published on George Washington are secondary sources. The author may have studied original material, such as diaries, in creating an account of Washington's life, but if it is the author's account instead of the original diaries, documents, etc, then it is a secondary source.

For most research papers, secondary sources will probably suffice; however, if the professor requires using primary sources, this tutorial may serve as a guide on where to begin the search.

Tertiary Source

Tertiary sources are "generalized surveys of a specific subject." They are even more removed from the original event than secondary sources. While authors of secondary source material gather their information directly from primary sources, authors of tertiary source material gather information from a variety of secondary sources.

Examples of tertiary sources include textbooks, handbooks, dictionaries, and encyclopedias. (From <http://www.kings.edu/history/sources.html>)

Locating Primary Source Materials

Primary sources may be found through a variety of avenues, depending on the subject matter. The following lists sources for finding original material:

Original Research Articles

In the natural and social sciences, a primary source is an original research article, so electronic databases are the place to look for this type of material. All of the databases below and many others are available via the [Databases and E-resources](#) page.

Examples:

ScienceDirect
JSTOR
Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection
CINAHL

Historical Sources

Library Catalog

Use a keyword search and type the following into the search field:

Subject heading for your topic AND (diaries OR personal narratives OR sources)

Example: Washington George AND (diaries OR personal narratives OR sources)
Also try searching using your subject and the terms "archives" and "manuscripts."

Harper's Weekly

This is an [electronic resource](#) available via the USC Upstate Library web site. It features material from Harper's Weekly, a magazine published in the 1800s that "provided detailed information and insights on political, military and social issues and events prior to and during the Civil War and through the years of Reconstruction." The materials in the database are digitized articles, photographs, ads, etc. presented in their original format.

American Memory from the Library of Congress

American Memory is "a gateway to rich primary source materials relating to the history and culture of the United States." According to the site information, there are more than 7 million digital items available, including print, audio, and photographs. Browse the different collections available, or perform a search for material on specific topics. This site is a valuable resource for anyone conducting historical research.

The Making of America

The Making of America, produced by the Cornell University Library, is a searchable site of digitized primary source materials from pre-Civil War to Reconstruction. It features

"267 monograph volumes and over 100,000 journal articles with 19th century imprints."
It is a rich source of historical information.

Documenting the American South

Documenting the American South is a site published by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Library. It is a digital collection of primary source historical materials "on Southern history, literature and culture from the colonial period through the first decades of the 20th century." The collection includes sections such as "First Person Narratives of the American South" and "The Southern Homefront, 1861-1865." To find information, visitors to the site can choose between searching the collection or browsing by subject, author, or title.

Spartanburg County Public Libraries - Kennedy Room

The Kennedy Room at the Spartanburg County Public Library is a useful source for local history, particularly genealogy. The types of materials available include census records, land records, and obituary indexes. The obituary indexes may be searched by name on the Web site, but to access the full obituary, you must visit the library in person or have the information mailed to you.

National Union Catalog of Manuscripts (NUCMC)

NUCMC is "a free-of-charge cooperative cataloging program operated by the Library of Congress." The site allows visitors to perform searches to determine the existence and location of primary source materials. For each item located, the catalog displays information about the material, including in which library it is housed.

Other Sources

[Papers First](#)

PapersFirst is an electronic resource that "indexes papers from every congress, exposition, workshop, symposium and meeting received at the British Library since October 1993." It encompasses a wide variety of topics such as medicine, psychology, and business, but does not contain full-text articles.

[Proceedings First](#)

ProceedingsFirst is an electronic resource that provides the tables of contents of papers presented at conferences worldwide. Each record contains a list of the papers presented at each conference. Like its companion, PapersFirst, ProceedingsFirst provides access to the British Library Document Supply Center's vast collection of conference proceedings. Also like PapersFirst, the material covers many subject areas, and it does not contain any full-text articles.

InfoMine

InfoMine is a database that contains links to a variety of academic resources. Additional primary source material may be located by searching InfoMine with the search phrase "primary source."

Citing Primary and Secondary Sources:

Citing a primary source by itself is easy—simply cite the source in the text and reference list by following the guidelines in the style manual of choice. Citing a primary source that is discussed in a secondary source is not always as straightforward. Each style manual handles it differently. Some styles require documenting both the primary and secondary sources in the reference list, while others require citing only the source actually read (the secondary source).

Below are page numbers and sections in each style manual to find instructions and examples for how to cite this type of material. The most recent editions of these manuals are available at the library reference desk.

APA:

Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association, 5th ed.
p. 245 and 247

MLA:

MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers, 5th ed.
p. 220: Section 5.4.7 – Citing Indirect Sources

Turabian:

A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations, 5th ed.
By Kate L. Turabian
p. 158: Section 9.129

Chicago:

The Chicago Manual of Style, 14th ed.
p. 635: Sections 15.425-15.426
p. 676-677: Sections 16.124-16.125