# Primary and Secondary Sources

Researchers in most disciplines make a distinction between primary and secondary sources, and understanding that difference is critical for the success of your research and writing. Different disciplines define these terms in slightly different ways, so make sure you know how your field distinguishes between primary and secondary sources.

## Primary vs. Secondary

As their names imply, primary sources are directly related to the subject of your research while secondary sources are indirectly or more distantly related. Secondary sources are often the product of research done using primary sources (i.e. another researcher’s book or article that discusses your subject): in this case, secondary sources are secondary because they derive their information from primary sources. You can also think of secondary sources as interpretation rather than presentation; they are the conversation surrounding your subject.

Primary and secondary can also refer to the type of research you are performing. If you are working directly with your subject or generating your own data, you are performing primary research. If you are reading books, journals or reports to see what other researchers have discovered already, you are performing secondary research.

Whether a particular source is primary or secondary depends on how it is related to the subject of your research and your specific research question. For instance, an article that would be a secondary source for the research question “What is the role of Catholicism in Hamlet?” would be a primary source for the question “What were critics in the early twentieth century saying about Catholicism in Hamlet?” Evaluate sources with your research question in mind.

## History, American Studies, etc.

The research subjects of History and its related disciplines are people, events, movements, artifacts and/or the culture of a particular time and place. Primary sources are original artifacts or accounts from the time period, including official documents like birth certificates, letters to or from a subject, eyewitness accounts, photographs, sound recordings, etc. Secondary sources comment on or interpret those primary sources, and may come from a later time period.

### Primary Sources

* *NYT* story covering the 1960 election
* John F. Kennedy’s birth certificate
* Eye-witness account of Kennedy’s assassination
* Marilyn Monroe’s Diary
* Photograph of Lee Oswald in Russia
* Zapruder film of Kennedy in Dallas

### Secondary Sources

* *NYT* article analyzing election coverage
* Biography of John F. Kennedy
* Timeline created by compiling eye-witness accounts
* Critical introduction to Monroe’s diary
* Article on Oswald’s life as a defector
* List of changes to downtown Dallas

## Rhetoric, Literature, Music, Art, etc.

The research subjects of the fine arts and liberal arts tend to be specific artifacts or groups of artifacts and their cultural histories. Primary sources are usually the artifacts themselves: speeches, novels, songs, sculptures, etc. The letters or related writings of a rhetorician, author, composer or artist may also be used as primary sources for certain projects. Secondary sources offer analysis, interpretations or readings of primary sources and tend to be in the form of books, articles and reviews.

### Primary Sources

* Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*
* Picasso’s *Guernica*
* King’s “I Have a Dream” Speech
* Mozart’s *Jupiter* Symphony
* A first edition of *Leaves of Grass*
* Kubrick’s *Dr. Strangelove*
* Letter from Nabokov to Edmund Wilson

### Secondary Sources

* Article on Woolf’s “visual modernism”
* Book on artists in the Spanish civil war
* Analysis of King’s biblical language
* Biography of Wolfgang Mozart
* List of changes in second edition
* *NYT* review of *Dr. Strangelove*
* Article on Wilson’s importance to Nabokov’s American fiction

## Social and Natural Sciences, Engineering, Medicine, etc.

The research subjects of the sciences are social and natural phenomena or their technological applications. Scientific disciplines often distinguish between primary and secondary research along with or instead of primary and secondary sources. Primary or original research involves designing and running experiments in the laboratory, observing your subject in the field, or collecting data through surveys and interviews. Secondary research involves going to the library or accessing online databases and reading other researchers’ findings about your subject. Reports and other publications in which a researcher presents his or her original research are often considered primary resources. Secondary resources are based on data and results reported in primary resources. The terminology can vary widely by discipline.

### Primary Research/Resources

* Testing a new method for chain-growth polymerization
* Testing a new antidepressant in a clinical drug trial
* Safety testing the specifications for a fuel line
* Interviewing volunteer subjects for a study on stress and memory
* Report on a new process for extracting DNA from cheek cells

### Secondary Research/Resources

* Reading a chapter on polymerization in your chemistry textbook
* Surveying the findings from recent trials of antidepressants
* Reading product literature for fuel line specs
* Searching for articles about stress and memory on HAPI
* *Nova* episode on DNA research