

Primary and Secondary Sources: Overview and Explanation

Sources can be categorised as either primary or secondary. The following explains what these categories mean.

What is a Primary Source?

A primary source is an original record created by the person or people who were there. Primary sources offer a personal point of view. They are available in numerous places such as homes, libraries, archives, and online in blogs.

KEY POINT – *Primary sources are first-hand accounts by witnesses of events.*

Primary sources can be written documents, but they can also be images, audio files, objects, or as numbers (stats).

Memoirs, photographs, pottery, gravestones, weapons, weather records, diaries, legal agreements, maps, recipes, adverts, sermons, lectures can all be primary sources.

What is a Secondary Source?

A secondary source is a document, text, image or object created by someone who referenced or referred to a primary source for their information. Textbooks are excellent examples of secondary sources.

KEY POINT – *Secondary sources uses primary sources.*

Like primary sources, secondary ones come in different formats – texts, films, blogs and so on.

Using Primary Sources allows you to:

1. Obtain information directly from the individual who was there.
2. Understand an experience through their eyes.
3. Grasp that all events in history vary depending on viewpoint
4. Realise that 'facts' are also interpreted.

Using Secondary Sources allow you to:

1. Understand how scholars are thinking and have thought about a subject
2. Grasp the way events are represented in literature
3. Obtain an overview of a topic area and how social narratives are constructed

Primary or Secondary?

Use Primary Sources to:

- get a personally exact account of an historical event or new idea.
- examine a situation without the influence of other opinions.
- gain a sense of the attitudes, and concerns of the people themselves.
- ensure that secondary sources have presented the original ideas accurately.

Use Secondary Sources for:

- historical, theoretical or critical perspectives.
- information on how others have analysed primary sources.
- you need to ground your own research in an academic setting (i.e., show that others have done similar research to yours and share or contradict your opinions).
- you want a list of primary sources that could potentially be useful in your research—the works cited page of a secondary source can be a great resource for this!

(Adapted from
https://www.tamuk.edu/artsci/_files_COAS/museum/Primary_and_Secondary-Sources1.pdf)