

Identifying and Finding Primary, Secondary, and Tertiary Sources

Your professor has instructed you to get primary or secondary materials for your research project, and you are confused. If you understand the publication cycle of information, you will then understand what your professor means when s/he requests primary or secondary materials.

The chart below defines the different stages of the cycle of information.

	PRIMARY	SECONDARY	TERTIARY
DEFINITIONS	Sources that contain raw, original, non interpreted and unevaluated information.	Sources that digest, analyze, evaluate and interpret the information contained within primary sources. They tend to be argumentative.	Sources that compile, analyze, and digest secondary sources. They tend to be factual.
TIMING OF PUBLICATION CYCLE	Primary sources tend to come first in the publication cycle.	Secondary sources tend to come second in the publication cycle.	Tertiary sources tend to come last in the publication cycle.
FORMATS --depends on the kind of analysis being conducted.	Often newspapers, weekly and monthly-produced magazines; letters, diaries.	Often scholarly periodicals and books. (Professors like these.)	Often reference books.
EXAMPLE: <u>Historian</u> (studying the Vietnam War)	Newspaper articles, weekly news magazines, monthly magazines, diaries, correspondence, diplomatic records.	Articles in scholarly journals analyzing the war, possibly footnoting primary documents; books analyzing the war.	<u>Historical Dictionary of Vietnam ; The Vietnam War, An Almanac</u>
Example: <u>Literary Critic</u> (studying the literature of the Vietnam War)	Novels, poems, plays, diaries, correspondence.	Articles in scholarly journals analyzing the literature; books analyzing the literature; formal biographies of writers of the war.	<u>Writing About Vietnam; A Bibliography of the Literature of the Vietnam Conflict; Dictionary of Literary Biography</u>
Example: <u>Psychologist</u> (studying the effects of the Vietnam syndrome)	Article in a journal that reports research and its methodology; notes taken by a clinical psychologist.	Articles in scholarly publications synthesizing results of original research; books analyzing results of original research.	<u>Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders; The Encyclopedic Dictionary of Psychology</u>
Example: <u>Scientist</u> (studying Agent Orange exposure)	Article in a journal reporting research and methodology.	Articles in scholarly publications synthesizing results of original research; books doing same.	<u>Agent Orange and Vietnam: An Annotated Bibliography</u>

Williams Library, Texas A&M University at Galveston, May 26, 2010

This handout adapted from "Identifying Primary, Secondary, and Tertiary Sources," William Madison Randall Library, University of North Carolina Wilmington. Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial – Share Alike 3.0 United States License