



LIBRARY READER

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Source of clarification:

Primary, secondary, tertiary sources - what's the difference?

Your professor assigns a research paper that requires you to use a primary source, two secondary sources, and a tertiary source. Where do you find them?

Primary sources are publications that contain original content published for the first time. They are the original publication of a researcher's data and conclusions. **Scholarly journals** that use the peer review process, by which articles are evaluated prior to publication, are considered primary sources. In historical research, primary sources can be **diaries, letters, photographs, artifacts**, and more.

Secondary sources are publications summarizing and pointing to the primary literature after it appears. **Article databases**, in which you can search many journals to find articles, are secondary sources. **Review articles** are a type of secondary literature because they summarize and point to the primary literature after it has appeared. **Meta-analysis articles** use a statistical technique to summarize and review previous quantitative research. Both provide excellent background material by pulling together all the latest research on a topic. The content of **newspapers** and **popular magazines** is secondary literature, i.e. about the research of others rather than the original reports.

Tertiary sources are publications that summarize and point to the primary literature, but generally only after it has become widely accepted and believed. Reference books like **handbooks, encyclopedias, and textbooks**, are all good sources for background information.

Quiz Yourself! Are the following sources considered primary (P), secondary (S) or tertiary (T)?

1. *The New York Times*
2. *Journal of the American Medical Association*
3. *Dictionary of Subjects and Symbols in Art*
4. *Handbook of Household Hazardous Waste*
5. CINAHL
6. *Journal of Cell Biology*
7. ERIC

Answers: 1. S 2. P 3. T 4. T 5. S 6. P 7. S

- *Nature, Science*, and the *New England Journal of Medicine* publish original research and include peer-reviewed scholarly articles as primary literature.
- Each academic discipline has scholarly peer-reviewed journals that publish original research in the field.
- UNE has four special collections that may include primary sources such as letters, diaries, or artifacts: the *Maine Women Writers Collection*, the *Westbrook College History Collection*, the *New England Osteopathic Heritage Center* and the *Bush Legacy Collection*.
- UNE faculty and students are producing primary literature whenever they publish the results of their research.
- To locate articles from the primary literature, UNE Library Services subscribe to over 150 databases including: CINAHL, JSTOR, Medline, MLA Bibliography, Philosopher's Index, Proquest Central, PsycInfo, Scopus, and more!
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