

Primary and Secondary Sources*

The scope and specific type of sources included in each group vary from field to field. Here is a definition that applies to most fields of study:

Primary sources are original materials that have not been filtered through interpretation or evaluation by a second party.

Secondary sources analyze, evaluate or discuss a primary source.

Humanities and Interdisciplinary Studies

Primary sources include:

- Books such as personal narratives, memoirs, and autobiographies, collected works, and collections of documents (these may be edited and published after the historical event or time period)
- Poems, novels, and other forms of fiction
- Songs
- Films
- TV shows
- Government documents
- Archival sources such as diaries, interviews, letters, memos, manuscripts, and other papers and records of organizations
- Multimedia sources such as photographs, audio recordings, and motion pictures or video recording
- Birth certificates or trial transcripts

Secondary sources include:

- Biographies
- Indexes, Abstracts, Bibliographies (used to locate a secondary source)
- Journal Articles analyzing primary sources (see list above)
- Literary Criticism
- Film analyses
- Monographs written about a specific issue (in history, literary studies, etc.)
- Reviews of books, movies, musical recordings,. works of art, etc.

Social Sciences, Science and Engineering

Primary sources include:

- Original publication of a scientist's new data, results and theories, experimental research results in scientific journals
- Conference papers
- Dissertations
- Interviews
- Laboratory notebooks
- Patents
- Surveys reported in journal articles.
- Technical reports.
- Original publication of a scientist's new data, results and theories, experimental research results in scientific journals
- Report results/findings/data from experiments or research studies

Secondary sources include:

- Review articles (i.e. articles discussing the strengths and weaknesses of primary articles)
- Annual reviews (usually evaluating a group of articles published on a specific topic)
- Handbooks
- Manuals
- Scientific encyclopedias
- Text books

These are some general examples. Make sure you understand the specific requirements of your field by asking your professor in the disciplines for clarification.

*I have borrowed some ideas and specific examples for this handout from the following sources: "Primary and Secondary Sources for Science" published by the University Libraries at the State University of New York at Albany and "Research Guides" by the Michigan State University Libraries

Exercise:

Identify the sources as primary or secondary by writing the letter P (primary) or S (secondary) next to each one:

1. a. A photograph of the actor Gerard Butler as Leonidas in the film *300*

b. a book titled *Digital Imaging in Popular Cinema* by Lisa Purse that includes a discussion of the photograph

2. a. A chart of median income by race from the US Census Bureau

b. An article published on a research center website titled “New Census Data Show No Progress in Closing Stubborn Racial Income Gaps” by Valerie Wilson

3. a. An interview you conducted with a friend who participates in bodybuilding contests.

b. An article titled “*Clinical Features of Muscle Dysmorphia Among Males with body Dysmorphic Disorder*” by Harrison G. Pope et al that discusses a mental health condition that involves unrealistic body image perception in some bodybuilders.

4. a. A video of a 3 year old boy being comforted during shots with his father saying, “Say, I am a man!” in the hope that the child will stop crying.

b. The article “Teaching Men to be Emotionally Honest” by Andrew Reiner which discusses the video with the crying toddler (see above).

5. a. an article titled “Muscle-enhancing Behaviors Among Adolescent Girls and Boys” by Marla E. Eisenberg, Melanie Wall, Dianne Neumark-Sztainer (these authors designed, conducted and reported the results of their study in a peer-reviewed journal)

b. a literature review article titled “Body Image dissatisfaction among Males across the Lifespan: A review of past literature” by Marita McCabe and Lina Ricciardelli (peer-reviewed article that evaluates the important articles published on the topic; it includes a discussion of the Eisenberg, Wall and Neumark-Sztainer article cited above)

c. a *New York Times* article titled “Muscular Body Image Lures Boys into Gym and Obsession” by Douglass Quenqua (supported his argument with the results of the Eisenberg, Wall and Neumark-Sztainer study)