

1. Introduction

Whether conducting research in the social sciences, the ability to distinguish between **primary** and **secondary source material** is essential. Basically, this distinction illustrates the degree to which the author of a piece is removed from the actual event being described, informing the reader as to whether the author is reporting impressions *first hand* (or is first to record these immediately following an event), or conveying the experiences and opinions of others—that is, *second hand*.

2. Primary Sources

These are **contemporary accounts** of an event, written by someone who experienced or witnessed the event in question. These **original documents** (i.e., they are not about another document or account) are often diaries, letters, memoirs, journals, speeches, manuscripts, interviews and other such unpublished works. They may also include published pieces such as newspaper or magazine articles (as long as they are written soon after the fact and not as historical accounts), photographs, audio or video recordings, research reports in the natural or social sciences, or original literary or theatrical works.

Reviewing primary source material can be of value in improving your overall research paper because they:

1. Are original materials,
2. Were created from the time period involved,
3. Have not been filtered through interpretation or evaluation by others, and
4. Represent original thinking or experiences, reporting of a discovery, or the sharing of new information.

Examples of primary documents you could review as part of your overall study include:

- Artifacts [e.g. furniture or clothing, all from the time under study]
- Audio recordings [e.g. radio programs]
- Diaries
- Internet communications on email, listservs, blogs, Twitter, Facebook, and other social media platforms
- Interviews [e.g., oral histories, telephone, e-mail]
- Newspaper articles written at the time
- Original Documents [i.e. birth certificate, will, marriage license, trial transcript]
- Patents
- Personal correspondence [e.g., letters]
- Photographs

- Proceedings of meetings, conferences, and symposia
- Records of organizations, government agencies [e.g. annual report, treaty, constitution, government document]
- Speeches
- Survey Research [e.g., market surveys, public opinion polls]
- Transcripts of radio and television programs
- Video recordings
- Works of art, architecture, literature, and music [e.g., paintings, sculptures, musical scores, buildings, novels, poems]

3. Secondary Sources

In the social sciences, a secondary source is usually a scholar book, journal article, or digital or print document that was created by someone who did not directly experience or participate in the events or conditions under investigation. Secondary sources are not evidence per se, but rather, provide an interpretation, analysis, or commentary derived from the content of primary source materials.

To do research, you must cite research. Primary sources do not represent research per se, but only the artifacts from which most research is derived. Therefore, the majority of sources in a literature review are secondary sources that present research findings, analysis, and the evaluation of other researcher's works.

Reviewing secondary source material can be of value in improving your overall research paper because secondary sources facilitate the communication of what is known about a topic. This literature also helps you understand the level of uncertainty about what is currently known and what additional information is needed from further research. It is important to note, however, that secondary sources are not the subject of your analysis. Instead, they represent various opinions, interpretations, and arguments about the research problem you are investigating—opinions, interpretations, and arguments with which you may either agree or disagree with as part of your own analysis of the literature.

Examples of secondary sources you could review as part of your overall study include:

- Bibliographies
- Biographical works
- Books, other than fiction and autobiography
- Commentaries, criticisms
- Dictionaries, Encyclopedias
- Histories
- Journal articles

- Magazine and newspaper articles
- Textbooks
- Web site also considered primary]

4. Scholarly Journals versus Popular Publications

	Scholarly/ Academic	Popular Magazines	Trade Journals	Newspapers
Author	Scholar or researcher in field with stated credentials and affiliations	Staff writer, journalist, often a generalist	Staff writer, journalist often with expertise in field	Staff writer, journalist, columnist
Sources and Documentation	All sources cited; extensive bibliographies, list of references, or notes	No formal citations; original sources may be obscure	No formal citations; may refer to reports; may include a bibliography	May refer to sources in text; no formal list of references
Editorial Process	Blind peer-reviewed by multiple experts in the field	Reviewed by a single editor	Reviewed by a single editor	Reviewed by a single editor
Purpose	To present research findings and expand knowledge in a discipline or specific field of study	To inform about current or popular events, issues or popular culture; to entertain	To inform those working in the profession of events, products, techniques, and other professional issues.	To inform about current events and issues internationally, domestically, and locally
Structure of Articles	Lengthy (10+ pages) articles divided into specific sections, such as, literature review, methodology, results, discussion, and conclusion	Mix of short articles with in-depth articles on a variety of subjects	Industry specific articles of varying length; report news and trends but no original research	Brief articles, unless feature; may include original research written in a journalistic, investigative style
Frequency of Publication	Annually, semi-annually, quarterly, or monthly	Monthly or weekly	Monthly or weekly	Weekly or daily
Titles	May contain the words "Journal of", "Review of" or "Annals"; may contain the name of a discipline or subject area; may be lengthy	Straightforward; may address a general theme or subject; may be one word	Usually short and catchy; may contain the name of a trade or industry [e.g., <i>Grocery Store News</i>]	Simple; usually reflects a city or geographic location

Intended Audience	Scholars, researchers, scientists, advanced students	General public	Industry members, professionals, and associated stakeholders	General public, some with specialization (e.g., <i>Wall Street Journal</i> for readers in business)
Value and Usefulness in Research	Critical to understanding and analyzing a topic in detail and to design a coherent, well-organized original research study	Limited; news magazines, such as, <i>Time</i> are useful for following current events	Limited to understanding news and trends in specific industries and professions	Essential to following current events; provides local coverage of issues



The Literature Review