

Identifying Primary, Secondary and Tertiary Sources *

Often your professor will suggest that you use primary or secondary materials for your research project. It is not always easy to discern the difference between these resources. The chart below has been designed to assist, but please consult your professor or a librarian if you are unsure about identifying a particular source in this manner.

	PRIMARY	SECONDARY	TERTIARY
DEFINITION	An original object or document—the raw research or first-hand information.	Comments on, interpretations of, or discussions about the primary or original source.	Provide background information or compilations by synthesizing information gathered from other sources, usually secondary sources.
TIMING	Primary sources usually come first in the timing of scholarly publication.	Secondary sources usually come second in the timing of scholarly publication.	Tertiary sources usually come third or last in the timing of scholarly publication.
TYPES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Letters & diaries • Speeches and interviews • First-hand news accounts • Government reports • Laws and legislation • Creative writings (ex. novels or poetry) • Results of scientific experiments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Critical reaction to an experiment or to a piece of literature • Analysis of social, cultural or economic trends • Review of the literature on a topic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overviews or background info (ex. encyclopedias) • Compilation of citations and abstracts (ex. library databases) • Statistical handbooks
EXAMPLES *** <u>Politics</u> <u>Major</u> (studying terrorism in the wake of the 9/11 attacks)	National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States. (2004). The 9/11 Commission report: final report. New York: Norton.	Carpenter, T. (2005, Winter). Missed Opportunities: The 9/11 Commission Report and US Foreign Policy. <i>Mediterranean Quarterly</i> , 16(1), 52-61.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Worldwide Political Science Abstracts (Library database) • Encyclopedia of terrorism and political violence
EXAMPLES *** <u>English</u> <u>Major</u> (studying creative writings about terrorism)	Updike, J. (2006). <i>Terrorist (a novel)</i> . New York: Alfred A. Knopf.	Steyn, M. (2006, July 31). Why John Updike's book is a bomb. <i>Maclean's</i> , 119 (29), 58–59.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Literature Resource Center (Library database) • Miller, R. (1988). The literature of terrorism. <i>Terrorism 11 (1)</i>, 63–87.

* This chart was adapted from a research guide prepared by the Library at the University of North Carolina Wilmington.

*** The examples have been cited according to the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (2001).