4.1: Primary, Secondary, and Tertiary Sources

A quality research paper is often just as much a result of the source material the writer finds as it is the actual writing. While tertiary sources like encyclopedias and online reference sources (Wikipedia, about.com, etc.) are useful as a starting point, your college professors will expect to see more primary and secondary sources cited in your research.

Primary sources are original works that have not been filtered through someone else’s evaluation or interpretation. They are the material on which other people’s research is based.

Secondary sources are one step removed from the original artifact or work; they respond to or interpret the subject. They are often scholarly and analytical (academic journals) or tend to be objective and factual (newspaper articles).

Tertiary sources are general reference works and, as such, might provide only limited coverage of your research topic. These include dictionaries, encyclopedias, textbooks—anything that has to cover a lot of topics and, therefore, can only devote a limited amount of space to the subject at hand. They make great starting places to get some background on your topic.

In the chart on the next page, notice that the primary source is often the actual raw material of the topic. You can’t get any closer to the subject of your paper than this particular source. The authors of the secondary sources most likely consulted primary sources to complete their work. Using both primary and secondary sources in your research can strengthen the quality and depth of your work.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RESEARCH QUESTION</th>
<th>PRIMARY SOURCE</th>
<th>SECONDARY SOURCE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Should Mark Twain’s novel The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn be censored on grounds that it’s racist?</td>
<td>The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn</td>
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Interview with a high school English teacher who has taught Twain’s novel and encountered opposition

Does the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 place too much emphasis on standardized testing?

The actual NCLB Act or “Executive Summary” at www.ed.gov

A New York Times editorial defending NCLB as a way to hold school districts accountable for progress

To what degree do reality television shows “bait” contestants and create drama through deceptive editing?

Specific episodes of The Bachelor, Keeping Up with the Kardashians, Survivor, etc.

A scholarly essay from The Journal of Popular Culture on manipulative practices in television media

How much was Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. influenced by Mahatma Gandhi?

Speeches and letters of both Martin Luther King, Jr. and Mahatma Gandhi

Did the Donner Party pioneers resort to cannibalism when they were stranded in the winter of 1846?

Nineteenth-century memoirs and diaries of survivors of the Donner Party incident

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Is there a link between high-stakes exams and the abuse of the stimulant Adderall among college students?

A personal interview with a college student who battled an addiction to stimulants

Should consumers have the right to sue fast food franchises to hold them accountable for obesity?

Personal Responsibility in Food Consumption Act passed by the U.S. House of Representatives

Morgan Spurlock’s 2004 documentary Super Size Me
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