4.2: Types of Research Sources

It is a well-known cliché: we live in an information age. Information has become a tangible commodity capable of creating and destroying wealth, influencing public opinion and government policies and effecting social change. As writers and citizens, we have unprecedented access to different kinds of information from different sources. Writers who hope to influence their audiences needs to know what research sources are available, where to find them, and how to use them.

Primary and Secondary Sources

Definition of Primary Sources

Let us begin with the definition of primary and secondary sources. A primary research source is one that allows you to learn about your subject “first-hand.” Primary sources provide direct evidence about the topic under investigation. They offer us “direct access” to the events or phenomena we are studying. For example, if you are researching the history of World War II and decide to study soldiers’ letters home or maps of battlefields, you are working with primary sources. Similarly, if you are studying the history of your home town in a local archive that contains documents pertaining to that history, you are engaging in primary research. Among other primary sources and methods are interviews, surveys, polls, observations, and other similar “first-hand” investigative techniques.

The fact that primary sources allow us “direct access” to the topic does not mean that they offer an objective and unbiased view of it. It is therefore important to consider primary sources critically and, if possible, gather multiple perspectives on the same event, time period, or questions, from multiple primary sources.
Definition of Secondary Sources

Secondary sources describe, discuss, and analyze research obtained from primary sources or from other secondary sources. Using the previous example about World War II, if you read other historians’ accounts of it, government documents, maps and other written documents, you are engaging in secondary research. Some types of secondary sources with which you are likely to work include books, academic journals, popular magazines and newspapers, websites and other electronic sources.

The same source can be both primary and secondary, depending on the nature and purpose of the project. For example, if you study a culture or group of people by examining texts they produce, you are engaging in primary research. On the other hand, if that same group published a text analyzing some external event, person, or issue and if your focus is not on the text’s authors but on their analysis, you would be doing secondary research.

Secondary sources often contain descriptions and analyses of primary sources. Therefore, accounts, descriptions, and interpretations of research subjects found in secondary sources are at least one step further removed from what can be found in primary sources about the same subject. And while primary sources do not give us a completely objective view of reality, secondary sources, inevitably add an extra layer of opinion and interpretation to the views and ideas found in primary sources. As we have mentioned many times throughout this book, all texts are rhetorical creations, and writers make choices about what to include and what to omit. As researchers, we need to understand that and not to rely on either primary or secondary sources blindly.

Print and Electronic Sources

Researchers have at their disposal both printed and electronic sources. Before the advent of the Internet, most research papers were written based with the use of printed sources only. Until fairly recently, one of the main stated goals of research writing instruction was to give students practice in the use of the library. Libraries are venerable institutions, and therefore printed sources have traditionally been seen (with good reason, usually) as more solid and reliable than those found on the Internet.

With the popularity of the Internet and other electronic means of storing and communicating information, traditional libraries faced serious competition for clients. It has become impractical if not impossible for researchers to ignore the massive amount of information available to them on the Internet or from other online sources. As a result, it is not uncommon for many writers beginning a research project to begin searching online rather than at a library or a local archive. For example, several times in the process of writing this book, when I found myself in need of information, fast, I opened my web browser and researched online. Due to increased access to the internet, it has become common practice for many student writers to limit themselves to online research and to ignore the library. While there are some cases when a modified version of such an approach to searching may be justifiable (more about that later), it is clear that by using only online research sources, a writer severely limits his or her options.

This section of the chapter covers three areas. First, we will discuss the various types of printed and online sources as well the main similarities and differences between them. Next, I’d like to offer some suggestions on using your library effectively and creatively. Finally, we will the topic of conducting online searches, including methods of evaluating information found on the Internet.