



Margaret H. McAllen Memorial Archives

Some or all of the documents you have requested to study are secondary sources. It is important that you know that secondary sources do not necessarily relate the truth but rather the truth from the view point of the author. Even facts – such as dates – can sometimes be presented incorrectly in secondary sources.

The Margaret H. McAllen Memorial Archives, Museum of South Texas History has assembled some information found on the websites of several colleges and universities to help guide you in your research. The information includes definitions and tips to help you find your way through the maze known as research.

- ❖ The information below is from the Virginia Tech website accessed 04/28/2014
<http://www.lib.vt.edu/help/research/primary-secondary-tertiary.html>

When searching for information on a topic, it is important to understand the value of primary, secondary, and tertiary sources.

In the humanities and social sciences, primary sources are the direct evidence or first-hand accounts of events without secondary analysis or interpretation. A primary source is a work that was created or written contemporary with the period or subject being studied. Secondary sources analyze or interpret historical events or creative works.

Primary sources

- Diaries
- Interviews
- Letters
- Original works of art
- Photographs
- Speeches
- Works of literature

A primary source is an original document containing firsthand information about a topic. Different fields of study may use different types of primary sources.

Secondary sources

- Biographies
- Dissertations
- Indexes, abstracts, bibliographies (used to locate a secondary source)
- Journal articles
- Monographs

A secondary source contains commentary on or discussion about a primary source. The most important feature of secondary sources is that they offer an interpretation of information gathered from primary sources. Secondary source materials may be authored by anyone from a student to a professional historian and should, therefore, be evaluated in that context.

Tertiary sources

- Dictionaries
- Encyclopedias
- Handbooks

A tertiary source presents summaries or condensed versions of materials, usually with references back to the primary and/or secondary sources. They can be a good place to look up facts or get a general overview of a subject, but they rarely contain original material.

Examples

Subject	Primary	Secondary	Tertiary
Art	Painting	Critical review of the painting	Encyclopedia article on the artist
History	Civil War diary	Book on a Civil War Battle	List of battle sites
Literature	Novel or poem	Essay about themes in the work	Biography of the author
Political science	Geneva Convention	Article about prisoners of war	Chronology of treaties

- ❖ The information below is from the University of California Santa Cruz website accessed 04/28/2014 <http://guides.library.ucsc.edu/primarysecondary>

When evaluating primary or secondary sources, the following questions might be asked to help ascertain the nature and value of material being considered:

- How does the author know these details (names, dates, times)? Was the author present at the event or soon on the scene?
- Where does this information come from—personal experience, eyewitness accounts, or reports written by others?
- Are the author's conclusions based on a single piece of evidence, or have many sources been taken into account (e.g., diary entries, along with third-party eyewitness accounts, impressions of contemporaries, newspaper accounts)?

Ultimately, all source materials of whatever type must be assessed critically and even the most scrupulous and thorough work is viewed through the eyes of the writer/interpreter. This must be taken into account when one is attempting to arrive at the 'truth' of an event.

- ❖ The information below is from the Aims Community College website accessed 04/28/2014 <http://www.aims.edu/student/online-writing-lab/sources/primary-vs-secondary>

Finding Primary Sources:

While most of the sources that are found during research are secondary sources, it is often possible to also track down the primary source. To do this, look at the references, works cited, bibliography, or internet links (for an internet source) provided in a secondary source. These will often lead you to the primary source itself.