Primary, Secondary, and Tertiary Sources

As you conduct research, you will consult different sources of information. Particularly in the social science and humanities disciplines, a professor may even request primary, secondary, or tertiary sources. The distinction between these three hinges on their originality and proximity of when it was created. In general, consider if it is an original work, or whether it evaluates or comments on the works of others.

Listed below are some hints for determining the type of source you are looking at. If you’re still not sure, stop by the reference desk and ask the librarian on duty or send us an email at Ask A Librarian or ask your professor for assistance.

Primary Sources

- Original document containing firsthand information on which other research is based.
- Record what is happening when (or approximately when) it happens.
- Present original thoughts or discoveries.
- Share new information.

Examples
Scientific journals reporting on research results, original works of literature or art, interviews, speeches, newspaper articles reporting on events, photographs, government documents

Secondary Sources

- Works that analyze, evaluate, or interpret primary sources.
- Removed from original event by time or place.
- Tend to be argumentative.
- Can sometimes be difficult to distinguish from primary material.

Examples
Scholarly journal articles reporting on or criticising findings from primary sources, biographies, commentaries, review articles

Tertiary Sources

- Compile and summarize information from primary and secondary sources.
- Provides general overview rather than specific details.
- Index and organize citations.
- Great place for background information on your topic.

Examples
Encyclopedias and dictionaries, almanacs, bibliographies, handbooks