Primary vs. Secondary Sources:
What they are, how to use them, and where to find them

**Primary Sources**

Primary sources are produced by participants or direct observers of an event or time period. These sources may be recorded during the event or later on, by a participant reflecting upon the event.

Why would I use them?
Primary sources offer a first-hand or eyewitness account of a situation that is unfiltered by interpretation.

What are some examples?

* Newspapers
* Speeches
* Government documents
* Legal documents
* Public opinion polls
* Personal materials, including letters, diaries, interviews, memoirs, autobiographies and oral histories
* Artifacts, including photos, paintings, drawings, etc.

How should I use them in my research?
To analyze primary sources, ask yourself these questions:

* Who is the creator and what was their relationship to the event or issue?
* Why did the creator produce this source?
* Was the source for personal use? For a large audience?
* Was the source intended to be public (newspaper) or private (correspondence)?
* How neutral was the creator? What biases or interests might have influenced how the source was created?
* Can the source be substantiated by other primary sources? Can you confirm what the creator is saying?

Where can I find primary sources?

* In the Library catalog, use keywords that will limit to your desired format, such as ‘diary’, ‘letters’, ‘speeches’.
* In databases, choose collections of particular kinds of primary sources, such as newspapers, legal documents, statistics and more.

**Secondary Sources**

Secondary sources are interpretations and evaluations of primary sources. They are analyses of primary sources written by scholars and experts in a field after the time period or event has occurred.

Why would I use them?
Secondary sources have the benefit of hindsight. The author is able to contextualize the primary source in a way that takes into account other viewpoints and events that happened at the same time or afterwards.

Where are some examples?

* Biographies
* Reviews and criticism
* Histories, such as in books or documentaries

How should I use them in my research?

Secondary sources are useful when you need an expert’s or scholar’s interpretation of a topic. This individual has spent her career researching primary documents and interpreting, analyzing and contextualizing them.

What’s the difference between primary and secondary research?
In the sciences, primary research is written by those who actually performed an original experiment or are reporting their ﬁeld observations, i.e., of organisms or medical patients.
Secondary research is written by authors who summarize or discuss trends in the primary literature. This research will give you an understanding of the state of research in a particular topic or field. Often, scientists use terms like ‘review articles’ to describe systematic analyses of a topic or field.