

# Finding and Evaluating Research Sources

by Sophia



## WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you'll learn how to find, evaluate, and use primary and secondary sources, both in print and online. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

## 1. Types of Research Sources

Writers who hope to influence their audiences need to know what research sources are available, where to find them, and how to use them.

In your research for this course, you will likely encounter two main types of sources:

- Primary
- Secondary

### 1a. Primary Sources

A **primary source** is one that allows you to learn about your subject first-hand. Primary sources provide direct evidence about the topic under investigation, meaning that they offer you direct access to the events or phenomena you are studying.

➞ **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 hometown in a local archive that contains documents pertaining to that history, you are engaging in primary research.

Among other first-hand investigative techniques, some common types of primary sources and methods include:

- Interviews
- Surveys
- Polls
- Observations

The fact that primary sources allow you 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.



## TERM TO KNOW

### Primary Source

A direct, firsthand source of information or data.

## 1b. Secondary Sources

A **secondary source** describes, discusses, and analyzes research obtained from a primary source or from another secondary source.

➞ **EXAMPLE** Using the previous example about World War II, if you read a historian's analysis of soldiers' letters, 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.

➞ **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.

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 a researcher, you need to understand that so you don't rely on either primary or secondary sources without evaluating them.



## TERM TO KNOW

### Secondary Source

A discussion, interpretation, analysis, consolidation, or other reworking of information from a primary source or another secondary source.

---

## 2. Print and Electronic Sources

Before the advent of the Internet, most research papers were written with the use of print sources only. Now, researchers have both print and electronic sources at their disposal.

In fact, 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, using only online research sources will severely limit your options.

If you don't have access to a brick and mortar library, note that virtually all college and university libraries have

a web space, which is a gateway to more documents, resources, and information than any library building can house. From that website, you can not only conduct a search of your library collection but also access millions of articles, electronic books, and other resources available on the Internet.

As a researching writer, you should realize that printed and electronic sources are not inherently bad or good. Both kinds can be reliable and unreliable, although with printed materials, publishers and libraries take care of not letting utterly unreliable works through to readers. Both kinds can be appropriate and inappropriate for a specific research project.

It is up to researchers and writers to learn how to select both print and electronic sources judiciously and how to evaluate them for their reliability and appropriateness for specific research and writing purposes.

---

## 3. Determining Suitability

To determine how suitable a particular source is for your current research project, consider the following factors.

1. **Scope:** What topics and subtopics does the source cover? Is it a general overview of your subject, or is it a specialized resource?
2. **Audience:** Who is the intended audience of the text? If the text itself is too basic or too specialized, it may not match the expectations and needs of your own target audience.
3. **Timeliness:** When was the source published? Does it represent the latest information, theories, and views on the subject? Bear in mind, though, that if you are conducting a historical investigation, you will probably need to consult older materials, too.
4. **Authority:** What are the credentials of the author or authors of the sources? This may be particularly important when you use Internet sources since a lot of materials by various authors are posted online.



As part of your evaluation of the source's authority, you should also pay attention to the kinds of external sources that were used during its creation. Look through the bibliography or list of works cited attached to the text. Not only will it help you determine how reliable and suitable the source is, but it may also provide you with further leads for your own research.



### SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that there are two **types of research sources** you will likely encounter during your research: **primary sources** and **secondary sources**. You also learned that both **print and electronic sources** are viable options for research material. Finally, you learned that **determining suitability** of sources involves asking questions about scope, audience, timeliness, and authority.

Best of luck in your learning!

Source: This content has been adapted from Lumen Learning's "Finding and Evaluating Research Sources" tutorial.

**Primary Source**

A direct, firsthand source of information or data.

**Secondary Source**

A discussion, interpretation, analysis, consolidation, or other reworking of information from a primary source or another secondary source.