



Primary and Secondary Sources – English Transcript

Do you have an assignment that calls for both primary and secondary sources? Do you need some help distinguishing between the two? This tutorial will help you tell the difference between primary and secondary sources. You'll learn about their characteristics, you'll see some examples of each, and you'll learn how and when to use primary and secondary sources.

Primary sources are first-hand accounts or individual representations. They are created by those who have directly witnessed what they're describing. They are original documents and usually do not describe or analyze other documents. Primary sources may be published, but sometimes they may be unpublished. Let's look at some primary source examples.

General -- letters, diaries, speeches, and interviews. History -- a transcript of a speech given by Queen Elizabeth I, newsreel footage of World War II, the Battle of Gettysburg newspaper article written during the Civil War. Literature -- Shakespeare's play, Hamlet; Sandra Cisneros' novel, *The House on Mango Street*. Art -- Michelangelo's sculpture, *David*; Georgia O'Keeffe's painting, *Black Iris*. Social sciences -- interview transcripts of mentally ill patients, population data and figures. Natural sciences -- biology study results, field data collected by an environmental organization.

So when should someone use primary sources? To read eyewitness accounts or view photographs or video of an event instead of relying on a summarized explanation; to interpret data yourself instead of relying on another's interpretation; to reflect on and analyze works of literature or art instead of relying on another's opinion; to verify claims made in secondary sources.

Now let's look at secondary sources. They interpret or analyze primary sources. They are not created by those who have directly witnessed what they are describing. Instead, the authors of secondary sources build upon primary sources by summarizing, reviewing, or drawing conclusions, etc. Usually, secondary sources are published works. Let's look at some secondary source examples.

General -- textbooks, encyclopedias, analysis, and reviews. History -- an article analyzing Queen Elizabeth I's speech, a documentary recounting the battle history of World War II, a book discussing whether or not Gettysburg was the turning point of the Civil War. Literature -- an article that examines Shakespeare's writing style, a paper discussing themes in *The House on Mango Street*. Art -- a lecture given about Michelangelo's techniques, analysis of one O'Keeffe's paintings. Social sciences -- an article analyzing the results of a mental illness study, a book that discusses population trends over time. Natural sciences -- synthesis of results of biology studies, an article on the environmental impact of pollution.

So when should someone use secondary sources? To see what has been reported about a topic or event; to learn from experts' analysis, opinion, or interpretation of an issue or work; to gather background information on a subject. OK. Now it's your turn to try. Which of these two



examples is a primary source and which is a secondary source for a paper about Shakespeare's play, Hamlet?

The primary source is the actual play, Hamlet. This is the actual object that the paper is studying. The secondary source for a paper about Shakespeare's play, Hamlet, is the article that analyzes and studies the play. Which of these two is a primary source for a paper about Oregon salmon populations? Which is a secondary source? The primary source is the raw, unanalyzed numeric data containing Oregon salmon counts collected by the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife. It's important to remember that in order for information like data to count as a primary source, it must be unanalyzed and in numeric form only. The example of a secondary source for a paper about Oregon salmon populations is the article that analyzes or describes these populations.

Now try these last two examples. Which is a primary source and which is a secondary source for a paper about web communication? The primary source for the paper is the direct transcripts of published blogs on the web. Since your paper would be about web communication, the transcripts of published blogs represent the object that you're studying. The secondary source for that paper is the article that analyzes web communication.

For specific examples, and for more information about this topic and the entire research process, explore OSLIS. Thank you to the Oregon CLIP project for allowing the OSLIS Committee to adapt their tutorials. OSLIS -- Learn to Research. Research to Learn.