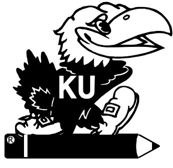



# Primary vs. Secondary Sources

The amount of information to manage in college is enormous. While you may have done previous work with the *Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature*, at the university you'll want to use more specialized sources as well. To do that, you'll need orientation to those resources. If your instructors make arrangements for library orientation for a specific course or assignment, appreciate the fact that they are trying to help you learn how to access the wealth of materials available in their specific fields of study.

Know also that your reference librarians are specialists in helping you access sources. Help them by:

- taking your assignment with you;
- sharing with them the topic you have generated, questions you have generated about it, and, if you have them drafted, your working thesis statement and outline.

Just because a source is in the library, on the Internet, or has a Ph.D. behind its name does not mean it is credible or appropriate for your assignment. Evaluate your sources critically, weighing their content and purpose against the purpose of your research project.

**Is the source a primary or secondary source?**

Academic research sources may be primary or secondary. **Primary sources** provide information directly from a source. Historical documents, autobiographies (written by the sources themselves), information gathered from interviews or questionnaires are all examples of primary sources. Because these sources are primary, you can know that they reflect what the writer chose to write at the time, but keep in mind that the information in these sources may or may not be accurate and well-reasoned. *The Declaration of Independence* and *Mein Kampf* are primary sources, as are any of Thomas Jefferson's notes about the drafting process or any of Adolph Hitler's architectural sketches.

Here are some questions that may help you evaluate your primary sources:

- What was the situation that prompted the writer to compose this document?
- What was the writer's source of information, motivation for writing, and biases?
- What other primary sources might expand, clarify, or contradict this document?

**Secondary sources** provide information indirectly, through authors who have made judgments about the quality of the primary and secondary information they have used. You must evaluate how well-informed and unbiased these judgments were. A historian's recounting of research on the process of change in government or a psychologist's use of Freudian psychology to analyze Hitler's personality would be examples of secondary sources.

Here are some questions that may help you evaluate your secondary sources:

- What is the writer's expertise in this field?
- What motivated the writer to compose this document?
- How is this person evaluated by others who are known to be experts in this field?
- What is the argument this writer is making about the topic?
- What contradictions do other sources offer? How credible are they?
- How is this book or article evaluated by others in the field?
- Is the information current? Contemporary to the event?

The importance of the timeliness of the information for your research will depend on the nature of your research. For some research projects, documents published decades ago would still be of value; in fact, in some cases such material would be essential. If, however, advances are being made on a topic, your information will need to be as current as possible. Keep in mind that if your research is comprehensive and current, your information will be current.

**How specialized is the information source?**

As with the rest of your writing, the appropriateness of the level of specialization of your information source will be determined by the situation—your assignment and the topic you have chosen.

Scholarly journals (*American Political Science Review*, for example) contain highly specialized information written by experts in a given field. The primary purpose of such publications is to share scholarship with others in the field. Your instructor is likely to cite the names of some of the fields of scholarly journals in lectures and in the course syllabus. All scholarly journals are not respected equally. If in doubt, ask your instructor for guidance.

Specialized periodicals (*Nation* or *National Review*, for instance) are dedicated to a specific subject, but instead of reporting and discussing cutting-edge research, the purpose is more to inform an educated audience interested in this subject. That audience may include—but is not limited to—readers of scholarly journals. The information, which is not as highly specialized and detailed, is likely to be easier to read, but the level of expertise of the authors will vary. Some writers are specialists, but others are general assignment writers and freelancers—secondary sources, in other words.

Popular news magazines (*Newsweek*, *Time*, *U.S. News* are the top three) inform an even more general readership about a variety of topics; consequently, they are less likely to provide a detailed look at a topic. They should not be discounted, however. Their articles (often written by reporters who have developed reporting expertise on the topic) provide orientation to current events, and on occasion their commentaries and poll results are useful resources.


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