Distinguish between primary and secondary sources

Deciding whether your project requires primary and secondary sources is necessary early on to allow for effective support of your main points.

For an overview of related key topics on conducting research, visit the videos and quizzes in this tutorial.

Explore It

Research assignments in different disciplines can require you to consult and distinguish between primary sources and secondary sources. Primary sources are firsthand, original, or raw information, such as letters, works of art, field notes, interviews, or lab results. Secondary sources are works that analyze, interpret, or comment on a primary source.

For example, say that you need to gather information about a federal law. You might check THOMAS online through the Library of Congress to download the text of the bill. If you quote the language of a bill from this site, you are using a primary source.

SAMPLE SOURCE: FEDERAL LEGISLATION SITE THOMAS

If, however, you used a database and found a news article about the bill that provides description and analysis, that article would be considered a secondary source.
Learn It

Sometimes research projects call for the use of primary sources and other times require you to use secondary sources. For many research projects, you’ll draw on a combination. As you consider whether a source is primary or secondary, remember that you will rely on sources for different purposes. Primary sources offer data or observations that are firsthand accounts and can add credibility. Secondary sources offer interpretation or summary and can help you see your topic in the context of a larger conversation. As you weigh the usefulness of a source, ask what need it fills in your project: does it offer data, personal observations, analysis, or some other support? Consider why you would use a particular primary or secondary source and keep in mind how it helps answer your research question.

For some projects, reading primary sources related to your topic makes it easier to evaluate the usefulness and reliability of a secondary source. But while primary sources can offer a distinct, firsthand perspective on your topic, you must still ask questions to assess all sources for credibility and signs of bias. Primary sources are not automatically more reliable than secondary sources.

Finally, note that regardless of whether you are using primary or secondary sources, you will need to cite them in your bibliography.

Field research In some cases, particularly in social science disciplines, you may need to gather your own primary source material. For these assignments, you may need to perform your own primary research by doing an interview, distributing a questionnaire, conducting a survey, recording observations, or performing an experiment. This work, known as field research, creates your own primary sources and allows you to bring new information, data, or perspectives to your research project. This kind of research requires careful preparation and planning; before you begin, be sure to check with your instructor for guidelines or appropriate methods.

Use It

Look at the two excerpts below from sources found using Questia. The first is from a collection of lectures by New York political figure and urban planner Robert Moses. The second is from a book citing the influence Moses had in creating automobile-centered cities.

Primary Source
“I doubt whether lack of central planning has been the major reason for the haphazard growth of our cities. . . . Human selfishness has been the greatest cause of all these troubles—the unwillingness of the average citizen to consider his fellows and to place pride of citizenship before personal gain.

Another reason for poor planning in the past has been the inability of even the most progressive citizens to anticipate mechanical inventions or to prevent growth and concentration of population. No doubt the advent of the automobile should have been expected, but those who prophesied its future not many years ago were voices crying in the wilderness.”


Secondary Source
“Moses also used the popular desire for grand highway and park projects to subvert public debate. He relied on the publicity gained from successful projects to build support for future plans. Although Moses owed his rise to Governor Al Smith, a machine politician, his power derived from being portrayed as a reformer able to cut through politics and get things done.”


Both excerpts relate to how Robert Moses wished to portray himself as a reformer in urban planning. Although both excerpts relate to the work Robert Moses did in the 1930s to expand highways, they present different perspectives and put Moses’s work in different contexts. Could you envision both of these sources being used in a paper? Might one source be more appropriate than the other in your discipline?