Primary, Secondary and Tertiary Source Guide

When conducting a research project, you will encounter three types of sources: primary, secondary and tertiary. The difference between these three sources is determined mostly through proximity.

**Proximity** is the difference between the time that an event happens and when the source is created. For example, the source could be created immediately or it could be created 50 years later.

A **primary source** is original material created during the time period that is involved. This is usually information that is taken from a firsthand account. Primary sources include sources such as interviews, letters, photographs and any other artifact created during the time period that is being researched. These sources are usually the most helpful if created by someone who is an expert on the subject.

A **secondary source** is generally written after a researched time period. Secondary sources interpret and evaluate the information shared in primary sources. Rather than showing pure evidence, such as primary sources might, they discuss and analyze the evidence from primary sources. Secondary sources may include academic journal articles, biographies, websites, etc.

A **tertiary source** is a collection of primary and secondary sources. Usually this source does not contain reflection from the author and often consists of compilations of facts. Tertiary sources may include almanacs, fact books, bibliographies, databases, etc.

Sometimes, it can be difficult to determine whether a source is primary, secondary or tertiary. Overall, it depends on how the source relates to the research question.

A **research question** is the formal statement of the goal of a study. It is a logical statement that progresses from what is known or believed to be true to that which is unknown and requires validation. Research questions should be very specific. For example, “How has the presence of violence in video games changed since their invention?” is more specific than “What sort of violence can be found in video games?”