

Understanding Primary and Secondary Sources

Differentiating between primary and secondary sources can be tricky. Read the table and complete the activities to gain a better understanding of the context-specific nature of primary and secondary sources.

	Humanities	Sciences
Primary Source	Provides a firsthand account of a research topic.	Contains original research.
Secondary Source	Interprets, summarizes, or critiques the original information.	Summarizes, analyzes, or reviews other primary research papers, but does not contain original research.

*In the social sciences, primary and secondary source definitions vary based on the type of method and theoretical approach of the specific discipline. Either the humanities or the sciences definitions may apply.

1 Read each researcher's research topic. One of their sources is primary and the other is secondary. Mark the correct box under each source.

Roy is researching the life of Martin Luther King, Jr.



Recent book on Civil Rights Movement

- Primary
 Secondary

Interview with MLK

- Primary
 Secondary

Leanne is researching 19th-century English poetry.



Academic article on English poetry

- Primary
 Secondary

English poem from 1850

- Primary
 Secondary

Sonya is researching the evolution of starburst galaxies.



**Astro-
physics
review
article**

Primary
 Secondary

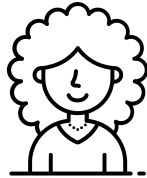
**Empirical
study on
galaxy
evolution**

Primary
 Secondary

2

A source that is primary for one research topic may be secondary for another. Under each researcher, mark whether they would treat the source in the middle as primary or secondary.

Sierra is a music historian researching the history of concert reviews.



Primary
 Secondary

**Concert
review of
Beethoven's
Symphony
No. 5**



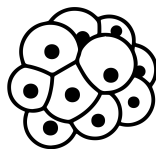
Primary
 Secondary

Mateo is a music theorist researching the harmony in Beethoven's *Symphony No. 5*.

3

Read each researcher's research topic. Think of 1-2 types of primary sources and 1-2 types of secondary sources that they can use in their research. Write them in the boxes.

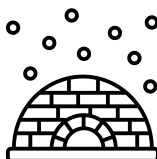
Carina is a biologist researching stem cells.



Primary

Secondary

Avery is a cultural anthropologist researching the Alaskan Inuit.



Primary

Secondary

4

Brainstorm ideas for primary and secondary sources that you can use for your research topic. If you don't have a research topic, write down a topic that interests you.

Research Topic	Primary Sources
	Secondary Sources

Answer Key

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Secondary source examples: meta-analysis, review article, other sources that summarize primary research 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Primary source examples: diary, photograph, Inuit artifact, demographic data
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Secondary source examples: academic journal article, book about Inuit, documentary film about Inuit 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Primary source examples: academic journal article, empirical study, experimental data

For more research and writing tips, and to play our online game on primary and secondary sources, visit WI+RE at uclalibrary.github.io/research-tips.