

Primary, Secondary, and Tertiary Sources

Doing some research allows you to discover the dominant ideas, theories, concepts, and debates that are presented in the literature. In other words, research reveals what has already been said on your topic. Since many sources of information are available, you must evaluate the ideas presented in the literature and select only the sources that contain accurate, reliable, and relevant information.

Each time you support your arguments with data, theories, concepts, and examples borrowed from other sources, you must indicate the provenance of this borrowed material by providing accurate references done according to the right referencing style.

Primary sources

Primary sources are original documents that were created during the studied period of time. They vary a lot from one field of study to another.

- **Humanities:** birth or death registries, censuses, correspondences, historic treaties, interviews, manuscripts, maps, newspapers, notarial acts, novels, paintings, period artifacts, photographs, poems, sculptures, statistics, surveys, testimonies, videos, etc.
- **Sciences:** articles or theses detailing an original study, case notes or observations, clinical exams, conferences, experimental protocols, industrial drawings, lab notes, patents, the periodic table, raw data sets or results, technical reports or forms, etc.

Secondary sources

Secondary sources (also called *academic sources* or *scientific sources*) are analytical documents that interpret primary sources. Among other things, they include books, electronic resources, memoirs, monographs, peer-reviewed articles, and theses.

Peer-reviewed publications are more reliable than Internet sources (especially when they do not have authors). In fact, Internet sources should be avoided, except for government websites, websites of reputable associations or websites approved by the professor.

Tertiary sources

Tertiary sources are descriptive documents that compile or index primary and secondary sources. Among other things, they include bibliographies, encyclopaedic articles, indexes and registers, library catalogues, and specialized databases. Generally speaking, tertiary sources aim the identification of sources rather than the evaluation of their content.

Subject librarians at the University of Ottawa library can give you information management tips that will help you to conduct your research. Do not hesitate to contact them to get started on your paper.

To know more about academic integrity and academic fraud, consult the University of Ottawa's academic regulations (available online).

Discipline	Primary source	Secondary source	Tertiary source
Biology	Journal article detailing an original study on cat-fish	Literature review on recent articles concerning cat-fish	<i>BioOne Abstract & Indexes</i> , a compilation of research abstracts
Criminology	Interviews with inmates concerning violence inflicted on pets	Article linking violence inflicted on animals and conjugal violence	<i>Criminal Justice Abstract</i> , a database that includes summaries of legal resources
History	Correspondence between Oblate missionaries and the Hudson's Bay Company	Doctoral thesis on the impact of the relationships between these two entities on Metis people	Archives of Manitoba
English	<i>Nineteen Eighty-Four</i> , a novel by George Orwell	Memoir on Orwell's impact on "Big Brother" surveillance practices in the United States	<i>MLA International Bibliography</i> , an index for publications on literature
Management	Market research on the purchase of gluten-free beer in Ottawa	Monograph on the consumer of gluten-free products in Ontario	<i>Osiris</i> , an analysis tool containing information on publicly listed companies
Psychology	Case notes on the behaviors of three young children in daycare	Probationary report on psychopathologies that are developed in daycare facilities	<i>Mental Measurements Yearbook</i> , a database that indexes studies done with human subjects
Visual Arts	<i>Rocking Chair No. 1</i> , a sculpture by Henry Moore	Book on the artistic representation of the mother-child relationship	Henry Moore Institute Library catalogue

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