What are Primary and Secondary sources in nursing?

During your nursing career, you may be asked to use primary or secondary sources in your research. What exactly are they?

**Primary sources:**
These are the first articles published formally, describing a research project or study. They are contemporary accounts of an event written by those who have experienced or witnessed an event. These include:

- Articles describing the research design and findings of original studies;
- Descriptions of new experiments;
- Patient interviews;
- Pilot studies;
- Case studies;
- Clinical trials;
- Dissertations;
- Video or audio recordings.

**Real examples:**
- A nurse interviews patients about their health behaviours;
- A pharmaceutical company conducts clinical trials on a new drug;
- A hospital surveys its nursing staff.

**Secondary sources:**
These interpret primary sources so are therefore removed from whatever is under review. They interpret, judge, have opinions on and draw conclusions such as:

- Meta-analysis (a method for combining data from several selected studies to develop a single conclusion that has greater statistical power);
- Scholarly book reviews;
- Textbooks;
- Systematic reviews (answers a defined research question by collecting and summarising all evidence that fits pre-specified criteria);
- Practice guidelines;
- Newsletters and professional news sources.

**Real examples:**
- The Ministry of Health’s plan to combat obesity in New Zealanders;
- A book on how Florence Nightingale influenced the nursing profession;
- *Mosby's guide to nursing diagnosis* (Textbook)
Ask yourself if in doubt:

How does the author know about the details? Were they there or are they drawing conclusions from a variety of sources.

Where does the information come from? Does the information come from a variety of sources or just one?

How to identify if a source is primary or secondary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Primary</th>
<th>Secondary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Very Specific – “Diabetes symptoms and self-management behaviours in rural older adults”</td>
<td>General - “Diabetes in New Zealand”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definition</td>
<td>Type of article, which describes a project or experiment.</td>
<td>An article that summarises all the work from primary sources.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Includes</td>
<td>Methodology, raw data, results, tables, conclusion</td>
<td>May be a literature review or an evaluation of a range of evidence.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Example words</td>
<td>Clinical trial, Study, Investigation, Examination, Surveys or Experiment.</td>
<td>Review, Evaluation, Analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Author</td>
<td>Carried out work</td>
<td>Describes work of others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Process</td>
<td>Carried out over a length of time</td>
<td>Often rapid as using data of others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source of information</td>
<td>Singular</td>
<td>Multiple</td>
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For further assistance

- Ask at the Library, Christchurch, Madras St. Campus
- Live chat with a Librarian during open hours via Asklive
- Ring (03) 9408089 or 0800 24 24 76 and ask for the Library
- Email: library@ara.ac.nz