

What are Primary and Secondary sources?

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

Primary sources:

These are contemporary accounts of an event written by those who have experienced or witnessed an event such as:

- Diaries;
- Letters;
- Speeches;
- Photographs;
- Interviews;
- Video or audio recordings;
- Case studies;
- Clinical trials;
- Surveys;
- Newspaper article? Only if it is an eyewitness account not an interpretation of an event.

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:

- Scholarly book or journal articles;
- Book or music reviews;
- Interpretive newspaper or magazine articles;
- Histories;
- Textbooks.

Secondary sources analyse, evaluate and contextualize evidence.

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?

For example, as a researcher, I want to write about what it is like to watch an All Blacks rugby game live. I go to the game and write up my experience. This is a primary source of information as I have witnessed this event. If I watched a news bulletin about the same game the next day, these would be secondary sources as they are one-step removed from the event. They interpret an event reported in primary sources.

Science and Engineering

Knowing what a primary and secondary source in sciences and engineering can be a little more complicated. Below is further clarification.

Primary sources:

These are the first articles published formally describing a research project or study. For example:

- Articles describing the research design and findings of original studies;
- Descriptions of new experiments;
- Patents and industrial designs;
- Technical reports;
- Patient interviews.

Secondary sources:

These tend to analyse and interpret the first hand studies of primary sources. For example:

- Articles that summarize an entire field of research;
- Scholarly book reviews;
- Articles that use a research question to select and blend published evidence relevant to that question.

A doctor creates an artificial arm for an amputee and he writes about it. This is a primary source as it is being written by the person who created the limb. Doctors writing afterwards about what this procedure meant to amputees are secondary sources as they are writing about the procedure after the event.

For further assistance

- Ask at the Library, City Campus, Christchurch
- Ring (03) 9408089 or 0800 24 24 76 and ask for the Library
- Email : library@ara.ac.nz