

## On Primary Source Research and the Classification of Sources for Research

From Johnny Turtle

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### What is Primary Source Research?

“Primary source research” refers to an investigatory method whereby the researcher bases her or his analysis on careful interpretations of primary sources. While the researcher’s analyses may also review and debate secondary sources and refer to definitions within tertiary sources, the validity of the investigation arises from the care to which the researcher uses primary sources as the primary mode of evidence.

### Classification of Sources for Research

**Primary source** A primary source is an original work of media, literature, or art, such as a film, a novel, a short story, a poem or collection of poems, or a performance.

Primary sources are also original documents produced by extremely authoritative or reliable sources within the time period under investigation. In this case, an interview with a subject would be a primary source.

**Secondary source** A secondary source is an article, essay, or a document that discusses primary sources.

A secondary source may also be a theoretical or conceptual article that debates ideas expressed in original documents.

**Tertiary source** A tertiary source is like a secondary source in that it may debate ideas related to original documents or primary sources. However, a tertiary source is less rigorous in its design and aims. One example of a tertiary source is a small booklet or handbook or “how-to” book that introduces or overviews a topic or a problem to

readers in simple, easy-to-understand language. Some people classify dictionaries, bibliographies, catalogs, encyclopedias, guidebooks and other introductory texts as tertiary sources.