## Primary, Secondary, and Tertiary Sources

Sources are considered primary, secondary, or tertiary depending on the originality of the information presented and their proximity or how close they are to the source of information. This distinction can differ between subjects and disciplines. In the sciences, research findings may be communicated informally between researchers through email, presented at conferences (primary source), and then, possibly, published as a journal article or technical report (primary source). Once published, the information may be commented on by other researchers (secondary sources), and/or professionally indexed in a database (secondary sources). Later the information may be summarized into an encyclopedic or reference book format (tertiary sources).

### Primary

Primary sources are original materials on which other research is based. They present original thinking, report a discovery, or share new information and have not been filtered through interpretation or evaluation.

**Examples**
- Journal articles reporting original research
- Theses
- Conference papers and posters

### Secondary

Secondary sources analyze, evaluate, interpret, re-package, summarize or reorganize information reported by researchers in the primary literature. They provide commentary on and discussion of evidence presented by primary sources.

Note that secondary sources are less easily defined than primary sources. What some define as a secondary source, others define as a tertiary source. Context is everything.

**Examples**
- Review articles summarizing current literature on a specific topic
- Textbooks (also may be considered tertiary)
- Magazine or newspaper articles

### Tertiary

Tertiary sources consist of information which is a distillation and collection of primary and secondary sources. They present summaries of or an introduction to the current state of research on a topic, summarize or condense information from primary and secondary sources, or provide a list of primary and secondary sources on a given topic.

**Examples**
- Encyclopedia articles
- Research guides
- Article indexes/databases, e.g. PubMed (also may be considered secondary)

---

Created by Noelle Stello & Leah Burch, NUNM Library
Adapted from: Primary, secondary and tertiary sources in the health sciences. (University of Minnesota Bio-Medical Library)
Comparative Literature: Primary, secondary & tertiary sources (Yale University Library)
https://guides.library.yale.edu/c.php?g=295915&p=1975859