



## PRIMARY AND SECONDARY SOURCES

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Primary and secondary sources are often a requirement in college-level writing. Sometimes, professors will prefer or require you to use one or both types of sources. Therefore, it is essential to learn how to identify the type of source you are using.

### Types of Sources

**Primary Sources:** resources that were produced by those who were direct participants in or witnesses to the events or topic under consideration.

*Examples:* historical documents, original photographs, artifacts, oral interviews, laboratory notebooks, patents, diaries, dissertations, notes, case studies, etc.

**Secondary Sources:** resources that were produced by people who were *not* direct participants in or witnesses to the event or topic; typically the authors synthesize, decipher, and scrutinize primary sources.

*Examples:* magazine/newspaper articles, reviews, criticism, interpretations, biographies, analysis, publications about the significance of findings, editorials, etc.

### Shifting Definitions of Sources

Sources can often switch between primary and secondary sources depending on the question being asked.

*Example 1:* Suetonius's book *Lives of the Twelve Caesars* written in the early second century.

**Prompt 1:** How did second-century Romans view a ruler's use (or abuse) of imperial power?

Suetonius's work would be considered a **primary** source because as second-century Roman, he is using his work to express his views and opinions on how previous emperors had exercised their power.

**Prompt 2:** What was the Roman Empire like under the reign of Julius Caesar (100-44 BCE)?

Suetonius's work would be considered a **secondary** source because he wasn't alive during Julius Caesar's reign. Therefore, he must have been using other people's writing and observations in order to complete his book.

*Example 2:* Euzhan Palcy's film *Sugar Cane Alley*, produced in 1983.

**Prompt 1:** How have people's views on colonialism in the Caribbean changed over time?

Palcy's film would be considered a **primary** source because she is using her work as a way to express her own opinions and views on how European colonialism affected the Caribbean as compared to how others viewed it.

**Prompt 2:** What was life like for former African slaves living in the Caribbean during the 1930s?

Palcy's film would be considered a **secondary** source because it is not footage shot during the time period that we are concerned with. She would have drawn on primary sources, such as oral interviews, in order to make her film historically accurate.

### **Biases**

It's important to recognize the different types of biases present in both primary and secondary sources. In either case, it is important that you continuously ask questions and look for other sources that support or contradict what you originally read.

Despite the fact that **primary** sources are often considered indisputable first-hand accounts, they can be full of the author's opinions. As any law enforcement agent will tell you, eye-witnesses to a crime are always going to have conflicting stories because they pay attention to different things. The same is true of authors. The way they see the world can influence the outcome of their product. Furthermore, they may be influenced by who is sponsoring their work or any number of other types of pressures, economic, political, or social.

**Secondary** sources can also be inaccurate. Authors express their biases through what primary sources they reference. Although it may seem like they have a bullet-proof argument, there may be contradictory sources that were not examined or purposefully ignored. Sometimes a primary source may be severely misinterpreted. By continuously questioning the authors' arguments and doing a little additional research, one can determine how reliable their arguments are. Like the authors of primary sources, those of secondary sources can also be influenced by outside forces.

### Works Cited

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