

# Primary, Secondary, and Scholarly Sources in Religion

Professors often tell students they must use scholarly sources for class assignments. Some professors may also require students to use primary sources. The distinctions between primary and secondary sources—or scholarly and popular sources—are not always clear. The purpose of this handout is to help clarify these distinctions. The handout also includes information about finding primary sources and scholarly/secondary sources.

## What are primary and secondary sources?

These terms do *not* simply refer to your main sources as opposed to subsidiary sources, but have a particular meaning in scholarly research and writing.

### **Primary Source:**

A primary source is original material or information containing firsthand (or uninterpreted) information about a topic.

Common examples of primary sources:

letters, diaries, photographs, interviews, original works of art or literature, court records, artifacts of any kind, government documents (like the Constitution), religious scriptures, legislation, memoirs, position papers of organizations, some web sites (for example, the web site of a religious organization), personal narratives (complete or excerpted), eyewitness accounts, policy issue statements, excerpts of seminal works (especially if they embody important ideas for a particular historical period)

### **Secondary Source:**

A secondary source contains *commentary on or discussion about* a primary source. Secondary sources offer an *interpretation* of information gathered from primary sources.

Common examples of secondary sources:

Biographies, journal articles, dissertations, critical/analytical monographs, indexes/abstracts

## Points to keep in mind about the definition of a “primary source”:

Primary sources are uninterpreted, factual data in relation to the research question being asked.

- “Uninterpreted” does not mean the primary source may not incorporate interpretation concerning a topic or question *different* from the research question.

- “Factual” describes the item or material as data relevant to a research question. “Factual” (in this context) does not mean the primary source presents facts concerning a topic or question different from the research question. (It may or it may not.)

**Examples:**

**Question:** How do conservative Hindus interpret the Vedas?

- *Primary sources* = narratives, articles, lectures, etc. that express Hindu interpretations of Vedic texts.
  - This is all interpretation (Hindus interpreting the Vedas). It is not interpretation with respect to the student or scholar studying this aspect of Hinduism.
  - The information is factual in the sense that it expresses what some Hindus really believe. It is not necessarily factual with respect to any other question, for example, the objective meaning of Vedic texts.

**Question:** What are the key elements of Freud’s interpretation of religion?

- *Primary sources* = writings by Freud in which he discusses his interpretation of religion (books, lectures, letters).
  - These texts would all be examples of interpretation, but not interpretation in relation to the research question the student is asking.
  - Freud’s writings would be factual data about Freud’s methods and views. They would not necessarily be factual in any other sense (for example, the specific claims Freud makes about religion).

**Whether or not information is a primary source or a secondary source often depends on the question being asked. The same material may be either primary or secondary depending on the research question.**

**Example:**

Eliade, Mircea. *Yoga: Immortality and Freedom*. Translated from the French by Willard R. Trask. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press [for Bollingen Foundation, New York, 1969]

- If the paper topic is yoga, it’s secondary: it is interpretation of primary materials.
- If the research question concerns Eliade’s methodology, it’s primary [*anything* written by Eliade would be a primary source].

**Almost anything can be a primary source depending on the research question being asked:**

- Academic journal articles are almost always secondary sources. However, if you were studying conventions of academic publishing, an article in an academic journal might be a primary source.

- If you were studying the culture of the United States in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, ANYTHING produced or used in the United States during that period would be a primary source. [In this case, “culture” would likely require some specification, which would in turn narrow the range of possible primary sources.]

## Using Primary Sources

*Primary sources are often useful resources in academic research (especially graduate-level research).*

Primary sources provide direct information about the actual topic, object, or phenomenon being studied. Depending on the question, primary sources may be the best or only source of information available. In some cases, you might be faced with disagreements in the secondary sources, and going back to primary sources might be one way to try to resolve the question. (For example, the best way to resolve conflicting claims about the Qu’ran in secondary sources may be to consult the Qu’ran itself.)

*A primary source is factual data, but depending on your research question, this does not mean it is necessarily useful or appropriate data:*

The primary source may be idiosyncratic and unrepresentative of the topic under investigation.

Research topic: Christian attitudes toward alternative medicine

The views expressed by a member of a non-mainstream, independent Church would be a primary source. But they may represent the views of a very small percentage of Christians. The source (the interview with a member of this Church) is primary, but not useful.

(This situation probably reflects a failure to adequately specify the research question. In this case, the research question might better be stated “*Mainstream* Christian attitudes toward alternative medicine.” This clarifies the nature of appropriate primary sources, i.e., texts, transcripts, interviews, etc. that express the viewpoint of mainstream Christians.)

*Primary sources generally require interpretation.*

Primary sources are by definition uninterpreted information in relation to your research question. If you have identified a “primary source,” but it seems to require no interpretation, you may need to reconsider your research question and/or the status of the source you are using.

Courses focusing on methodology or theory often include research assignments that require the interpretation of primary sources using a theory or theoretical perspective discussed in the course.

## Using Secondary Sources

*Secondary sources may or may not be considered appropriate for academic work. In academia, an appropriate, secondary source must usually be scholarly or peer-reviewed (a.k.a., refereed).*

Usually a source is considered “scholarly” when it is written by someone whose academic credentials indicate expert knowledge of the subject matter. Scholarly sources are only published if they have been evaluated and approved by a person (or persons) knowledgeable in the subject matter, for example, an editor, panel of editors, or other scholars (see “peer-reviewed” below).

“Peer-reviewed” refers to only those scholarly publications that have gone through the peer-review process, i.e., they have been scrutinized by a panel of other scholars knowledgeable about the topic (“peers”) before being accepted for publication.

## Finding Primary and Secondary Sources

### *How to Find Primary Sources*

Certain sub-headings attached to the Library of Congress subject headings tend to be associated with primary sources. Keyword searches in the Library catalog including these terms may retrieve primary sources (use quotations if the subject heading is more than one word, such as “personal narrative”):

- sacred books, biography, cases, correspondence, description and travel, diaries, fiction, interview, personal narrative, pictorial works, poetry, short stories, sources

**Example:** a keyword search on *Freud correspondence* retrieves

Freud, Sigmund. *The Freud/Jung Letters: the Correspondence between Sigmund Freud and C.G. Jung*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1979.

One of the subject headings given to this book is Psychoanalysts--Correspondence

**Some databases focus on primary sources** and/or provide convenient ways to retrieve primary sources. Examples of databases that focus on primary sources are:

- Smithsonian Global Sound for Libraries
- Women and Social Movements in the United States, 1600-2000
- America's Historical Newspapers
- In the First Person
- LitFinder (Essays, Plays, Poems, Speeches, Stories)
- North American Women's Letters and Diaries: Colonial to 1950

See (<http://sllibrary.org/research/databases/index.htm>) for more information

An example of a database that makes it easy to distinguish records of primary sources from secondary sources: *Opposing Viewpoints Resource Center*

- Search results in the *Opposing Viewpoints* database are organized by category. Notice the tabs above the first retrieved record. One of these tabs is “Primary Sources.” (Note: not all searches will necessarily retrieve primary sources.)

#### *How to find secondary, scholarly / peer-reviewed sources*

To find scholarly or peer-reviewed articles, limit an article database search to “scholarly,” “academic journal,” or “peer-reviewed” (as appropriate, depending on the database).

In many cases, finding scholarly sources is a matter of determining if items you have already found are scholarly or not.

*How do you know if an item is scholarly or not?* Look for these clues:

- The author(s) is easily identifiable; his or her credentials are provided; these credentials indicate that the author(s) is a scholar and expert in the subject matter of the article, book, web site, etc.
- Has few photographs (unless it’s about photography, architecture, or another appropriate topic) or commercial advertisements
- Includes extensive bibliographies and/or footnotes or endnotes
- Is written in a style that is technical and complex; uses jargon (terminology only those in the field would understand); appears intended for a more specialized audience (e.g., other scholars)
- Is published by a university press, academic press, or the press of a scholarly or academic association (e.g., The American Academy of Religion).
- Has a title that includes a subtitle (this is an especially good clue if the item is an article)
- Makes no attempt to entertain; the author’s intent is informative and/or persuasive
- If the source is an *article*, some additional clues are:
  - it has an Abstract, Introduction, Literature Review, Method of Data Collection/Methodology, Results, Analysis, and Conclusion
  - it appears in a periodical that is published monthly, quarterly, semi-annually, or annually
  - the title of the periodical includes the words *Journal*, *Review*, or *Annals*
  - the entry for that periodical in *Ulrich’s Periodicals Directory* lists Academic/Scholarly under “Document Type” (it may also say YES under “Refereed”—another way of saying Peer-Reviewed)