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Primary vs Secondary Sources

In the course of your academic career, you've most likely heard the terms **primary sources** and **secondary sources**. Perhaps you were instructed to use only primary sources, or to use secondary sources sparingly. But one kind of source isn't inherently better than the other. Rather, which kind to use depends on what you're writing.

The Differences Between Primary and Secondary Sources

Primary sources are firsthand accounts of events that are created at the time the events happened or created retrospectively at a later time by participants in the events. Primary sources are original documents and usually don't describe or analyze other documents. Primary sources can be creative works. Examples of primary sources include the following:

- Statistics and original research data
- Newspaper articles
- Personal correspondence (letters and diaries}
- Government documents and survey data, such as census or economic statistics
- Works of art and literature, such as paintings and plays

Secondary sources are one step removed from primary sources in that they refer to content first reported in another source. Secondary sources add a layer of interpretation and analysis. Examples of secondary sources include the following:

- Reference books, such as encyclopedias
- Textbooks
- Journal articles
- Biographies
- Dissertations

For an illustration of a primary and a secondary source, consider the following scenario. You're writing a paper about the placebo effect. A primary source could be data from a medical trial that was published in an academic journal. Secondary sources for this topic could be books about medication, the placebo effect, or health in general, or websites that define various anxiety disorders.

When to Use Primary and Secondary Sources

Primary sources are the foundation of original research. They allow you to make new discoveries, provide evidence for your theories and research, support your claims or criticisms, and provide historical perspective.

Secondary sources provide background information and aid in understanding the scope of a topic. They give an overview of other researchers' discussions and opinions. Secondary sources can also enable you to get information from primary sources that you can't access directly, such as physical documents located elsewhere or research articles in another language.

Primary and secondary sources both have their uses in writing. Secondary sources are frequently used as a starting point. Consulting secondary sources at the beginning of your research can afford a good overview of your topic and an understanding of how other researchers have approached it. Secondary sources often synthesize a large number of primary sources that would be difficult and time-consuming to gather by yourself. Reviewing secondary sources can help you refine and narrow your focus to particular primary sources you want to use.

Primary sources are used to provide credible evidence for your arguments. Without primary sources, your research may be considered unoriginal or unreliable.

Citing Your Sources

Citing primary sources in text and in references is straightforward. Citing secondary sources that mention a primary source is another matter, however. Generally, you should try to cite primary sources, but sometimes this is impossible. Read on for how to cite a primary source within a secondary source.

APA:
If you use a source that was cited in another source, name the original source in the introductory phrase:
Watts argued that … (as cited in Larson, 2012).
List the secondary source in your reference list. In this case, Larson would be included in the reference list, not Watts.

AMA:
Citing secondary sources in AMA format is much more complicated. In the reference list, the primary source information is listed first, followed by the secondary source information. Note that in AMA, a quoted source is differentiated from a cited source in the reference list.

Smith and Wesson [1(p.6)] noted the "complete irrelevance of this kind of data" in advanced discussions of this nature.

1. **Smith J, Wesson A. Information that could lead to confusion. *Am J Adv Discuss.* 1982; 14(6): 12-24. Quoted by: Winchester B. Reflections on information usage. *Arch Aust Discuss.* 2014; 45(4):45-57.**

Gentner[2] argued that children of all languages acquire verbs later than nouns.

2. **Gentner D. Why are nouns learned before verbs: linguistic relativity versus natural partitioning. In: Kuczaj S II ed. *Language Development, Vol. 2: Language, Thought and Culture*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum;1982. Cited by: Caselli C, Casadio P, Bates E. A comparison of the transition from first words to grammar in English and Italian. *J Child Lang*. 1999;26(01):69-111. doi:10.1017/S0305000998003687**

Keep in mind that in academic writing, both primary and secondary sources have important roles to play. Primary sources are the stars, providing evidence for your arguments. Secondary sources are the supporting players, guiding and showing you how your work relates to existing research.