

60 Second Podcast: Primary, Secondary, Tertiary

Librarian:

Really quickly, let's talk about Primary, Secondary, and Tertiary sources. What are they and how can you distinguish them from one another?

A primary source, in short, is a first-hand account of something or an original work by an author. So, the diary of a Civil War soldier, a haiku by a Japanese poet, sheet music, and any original work or idea are all primary sources.

Now, think of secondary sources as information in hindsight. I decide to read three different Civil War diaries by separate authors, and then I write an article on the experiences of Civil War soldiers. When you read my article, you are looking at a secondary source – it is once removed from the original or primary sources. So, your psychology professor's critique of Sigmund Freud's writing on the Id, Ego, and Super-Ego is another example. Just about everything written ABOUT an original work or idea is a secondary source.

Now, tertiary sources may very well be the easiest to distinguish. Tertiary sources tend to be large collections of various information compiled in list form. They will often contain information from both primary and secondary sources within them, such as quotations. Examples of tertiary sources are dictionaries, encyclopedias, textbooks, and reference websites.

Okay, that's our 60 second lesson. Remember, if you need more help or you didn't understand my fast talking, then please come to the reference desk and a Librarian will be happy to help.