

# PRIMARY, SECONDARY AND TERTIARY SOURCES

The places and things that provide information about a topic are called sources. You use them to conduct your research and you reference them to provide evidence of where you have carried out your research. Referencing your sources also means you cannot be accused of plagiarism.

It is important to understand the type of sources of information you may be required to use in an assignment or research. This guide explains what sources are, and identifies the three main types: primary, secondary and tertiary:

- **Primary sources:** are immediate first-hand accounts of a topic, from people who had a direct connection to it or created it.
- **Secondary sources:** are one step removed from primary sources, though they often quote or otherwise use primary sources. They can cover the same topic, but add a layer of interpretation and analysis.
- **Tertiary sources:** are compiled from primary and secondary sources and may be used for an overview of a topic or background information for any research.

It may be difficult to distinguish between the three types of sources. However, if you learn to identify the unique aspects of each one you can become a more efficient and effective researcher.

Evaluating the source and quality of the information that you find is an essential part of presenting reliable information to your reader. It's important to check if a source: is up to date; tells the truth and is accurate; has a reliable creator and; is not biased towards a certain viewpoint.

Ideally, you want to use a primary source whenever possible. Primary sources provide the closest connection to information, and include first-hand accounts, research and studies, reports, interviews and speeches, historical material, artworks, and audio-visual material. Secondary sources are one step removed from the information. These often add a layer of analysis and interpretation, often from experts or journalists, which can be useful. Use secondary sources when you are unable to find the primary source.

**Generative artificial intelligence (AI)** is considered a tertiary source as it gathers and consolidates other sources of information to produce content. Tertiary Sources must be used carefully and checked thoroughly for accuracy, bias, currency and relevance.

# PRIMARY SOURCES

A primary source will provide direct or first-hand evidence about an idea, topic, event, object or person. Some examples are:

Audio recordings	Autobiographies
Original artworks	Court records
Video footage	Interviews
Original letters and diaries	Photographs
Government documents	Newspaper articles reporting at the time
Primary research	Speeches

Think how these documents give you a “window to the past” that allow you look at material produced by people at a particular point in time.

These primary sources can be reproduced, for example, in a book, online, a video.

## PRIMARY SOURCES ONLINE

It is important to check if online sources are primary sources. A photograph may a primary source, but the text surrounding it is often a secondary, or even a tertiary source.

One important source of primary material in Australia is TROVE, compiled and hosted by the National Library of Australia. This collection includes books, images, historic newspapers, maps, music, archives, and more.

### TROVE:

<https://trove.nla.gov.au/>

In Tasmania you can look for local primary sources such as convict and family history.

### Libraries Tasmania & the Tasmanian Archives:

<https://libraries.tas.gov.au/tasmanian-archives/>

# SECONDARY SOURCES

Secondary sources are created by someone who did not experience first-hand or participate in the events or conditions you are researching. Think of them as second-hand information. They may contain pictures, quotes or graphics of primary sources. You should also check the bibliographies attached to secondary sources as they will indicate primary sources that have been used. Here are some examples secondary sources:

Biographies	Documentaries
History books	Journal and magazine articles
Literary criticism	Newspaper articles of analysis afterwards
Review articles – for books and film	Textbooks (can be secondary or tertiary)
Web pages	Commentaries

# TERTIARY SOURCES

A tertiary source is work based entirely on secondary sources, rather than on original research involving primary documents.

A quick way to determine if a source is secondary or tertiary is by checking the bibliography (if one is provided). Some examples of tertiary sources are:

Generative AI	Encyclopedias
Wikipedia	Textbooks (can be secondary or tertiary)
Indexes and bibliographies	Manuals
Dictionaries	Summaries & Databases