While primary sources refer to sources that contain original information, the distinction varies between subject areas and disciplines. Journal articles are considered secondary sources in the Humanities because they may discuss, critique, or analyze an author’s original creative work, while they may be a primary source to a biologist. Similarly, many newspaper articles are considered primary sources within the discipline of History because they report events as they are happening, contrasting the sciences, where newspaper articles are never used as sources.

When identifying primary sources, it is important to remember that the various forms the source could take is not what matters, but whether it contains original information or creative works for that discipline. This poster explains the differences in primary and secondary sources across subject areas, focusing on contrasting the definitions within science and humanities disciplines.

Primary sources are first-hand accounts of a topic, from people who had a direct connection with it, such as witnesses or people who were involved in the event. Many primary sources were created at the time of the event, but can also include memoirs, oral interviews, or accounts that were recorded later. They are the materials on a topic upon which later studies are based.

Secondary sources describe, discuss, interpret, comment upon, analyze, evaluate, summarize, and process primary sources. They will cover the same event. Many primary sources were created at the time of the event, but can also include memoirs, oral interviews, or accounts that were recorded later. They are the materials on a topic upon which later studies are based.

Secondary sources refer to sources that are second-hand accounts, written in the form of reviews, critiques, or analyses of primary sources. They are the materials on a topic upon which later studies are based. Secondary sources are materials that are not the primary source itself, but provide a different perspective or interpretation of the primary source.