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Research Sources: How to Distinguish Primary vs. Secondary

Karen Fields

Full Sail University

How to Distinguish Primary vs. Secondary

Research is done across many spectrums. The question is whether the information is from a primary or secondary source? The information needs to be accurate and concise from several sources to be able to make an informed decision or give accurate data. The ability to distinguish between primary and secondary source material is imperative when researching information. How do you distinguish between the two?

Primary sources are a first hand account of events. These documents are original from the person who experienced or witnessed an event. These documents can consist of personal journals, such as a Civil War soldier's diary or a speech manuscript. These documents are factual, not interpretive (Thomas, 2010). If research is being done on the population of 1950's Chicago, the primary source would be government or other vital statistic records, such as marriage and census records. Evaluations of these documents are carried out by Secondary Sources.

Secondary Sources review or interpret the information found in primary sources. Secondary sources consist of biographies, literary critiques of an author's work such as Shakespeare, or a newspaper article regarding the publication of a scientific research journal. Secondary sources speculate and place value on the information from the primary source. A modern example of secondary source speculation is the political pundits interpretation of the Presidents speech-the primary source. These interpretations should not be regarded as a reliable research sources because they are based on personal opinion and conjecture and not empirical data.

However, secondary sources can sometimes be considered primary sources. According to Percy (1997):

"I want to write a paper dealing with HOW Native Americans are portrayed in U.S. eighth grade social studies textbooks. I would analyze, say, ten textbooks in use today. Every reference to Native Americans would be noted and categorized based on some criteria. Perhaps the study would consider word choice, type of anecdotes included, and often most important, what is NOT included in the text. Then I would have evidence to draw conclusions about how the eighth grade social studies textbooks deal with Native American History. The secondary sources have become my primary sources because I am not studying what *actual events*; I am studying the *way* in which those events are recorded by a particular group of sources. I am studying not the history (which would require me to seek out primary sources) but the history books (the manner in which they present the history)."

The question remains when do you use primary versus secondary sources? Helpful questions in determining primary versus secondary sources would be (Hamid 2009):

1. *How does the author know these details?*
2. *Where does the information come from? Is it personal experience, eyewitness accounts, or written reports by others?*

3. Are conclusions based on a single piece of evidence or have many sources been taken into account?

Primary sources should be utilized when attempting to write, evaluate, or quote an historical source such as Thomas Jefferson or Abraham Lincoln. Pulling information from their original writings will give legitimacy and accuracy to whatever you are trying to say. A secondary source, such as a historian's account of events, would be used to interpret those writings and make them relevant to the nature of subject.

All sources of data or material used must be combed over with a critical eye to ensure the proper source is being used. This is imperative to be successful in business writing. The most important task in research is how to distinguish sources. It is an important skill that will be used throughout ones academic and professional career.

References

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