

• Evaluating Sources

With the widespread availability of the Internet, finding sources to support your thesis is only a URL away. Although we know there are benefits to the access gained through the web, it's important to consider each source independently—not only what the source is saying about your topic, but who has written and published the article. Consider the differences in the following sources:

Print or Internet

Be careful here! Some print sources are available online. If the source came from EBSCOhost or some other database, **the source is actually a print source that has been published online.** Generally, print sources are more stable than Internet sources. Think about *why* you are using any Internet sources—especially if you are using a lot of them—and perhaps brainstorm some other types of print sources that could provide the same information.

Primary or Secondary

What is a Primary Source?

A primary source is a document or physical object that was written or created during the time under study. These sources were present during an experience or time period and offer an inside view of a particular event. Some types of primary sources include:

- **Original Documents:** (excerpts or translations acceptable): Diaries, speeches, manuscripts, letters, interviews, news film footage, autobiographies, official records, email photographs, speeches
- **Creative Works:** Poetry, drama, novels, music, art, film
- **Relics or Artifacts:** Pottery, furniture, clothing, buildings, jewelry

Examples of primary sources include:

Diary of Anne Frank - Experiences of a Jewish family during WWII

The Constitution of Canada - Canadian History

A journal article reporting NEW research or findings

Weavings and pottery - Native American history

Plato's *Republic* - Women in Ancient Greece

film footage of the assassination of President J.F. Kennedy

What is a Secondary Source?

A secondary source interprets and analyzes primary sources. These sources are one or more steps removed from the event. Secondary sources may have pictures, quotes or graphics of primary sources in them. Some types of secondary sources include:

- **Publications:** Textbooks, magazine articles, histories, criticisms, commentaries, encyclopedias

Examples of secondary sources include:

A journal/magazine article that interprets or reviews previous findings

A book about the effects of WWI

Britannica Online encyclopedia

literary criticism analyzing a play, poem, novel, or short story

magazine or newspaper articles about events or people

political commentary analyzing an election or politician

Scholarly or Popular

The vast majority of you will want to use scholarly journals/sources as your principal research. Sometimes popular research will get you thinking and help start with the writing process, but overall, your research, for our purposes should be scholarly— you are all scholars.

Scholarly	Popular
Cover may list contents of issues	Cover features a color picture
Title often contains the word <i>Journal</i>	<i>Journal</i> is not in the title
Source found at the library	You can find this source at a grocery store or newsstand.
Few commercial advertisements	Lots of advertisements
Authors identified with academic credentials	Authors are journalists or reporters, not experts
Summary or abstract appears on 1st page	No summary or abstracts
Articles are fairly long	Articles are fairly short
Articles have bibliographies	No bibliography

Older or Current

Your choice of using an older versus a more current source depends on your topic. If you're doing current events in Iraq, a source from 1988 may not be helpful. If you're writing about the function of music in the Appalachian Mountains, you might find older sources helpful.

Why did you select this source? What kind of information did you hope it would provide or what information does it actually provide?

- Background info
- Explanations of concepts unfamiliar to you/audience
- Verbal/visual emphasis
- Authority and evidence for the claims you're making
- Counter examples or evidence
- Varying perspectives

Evaluate the actual source.

- Who is the publisher? What do you know about the company's credentials?
- Who is the author? His/her credentials?
- What is the date of publication? If it is a credible Internet source, publication dates will be provided. If there's no date, it's probably not credible.
- Can you identify the source's rhetorical stance? Are there biases here? Does the source hold a reputation as a left or right wing supporter?
- Who is the audience for the piece?

Adapted:

University Libraries: <http://knowledgecenter.unr.edu/help/using/primary.aspx>

Princeton Library: <http://www.princeton.edu/~refdesk/primary2.html>

Lunsford, Andrea. *The Everyday Writer*, 5th ed. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2012