RGO **Library &**
LEARNINGCOMMONS

A Guide to Primary, Secondary & Tertiary/Reference Sources

When conducting research, the ability to distinguish between types of information sources is a very useful skill.

This handout explains how to distinguish between primary, secondary and tertiary/reference sources and you how to use them appropriately in your research:

1) General Characteristics & Key Differences

	PRIMARY	**SECONDARY**	**TERTIARY**
Definition & Common Formats	Original materials presented firsthand and unfiltered, without interpretation or evaluation: ➤ Historical artifacts, diaries, records, newspapers, letters ➤ Works of art, literature, and music	Sources that comment, discuss, analyze, evaluate, and/or interpret information contained within primary and tertiary sources ➤ Academic journals and books ➤ Textbooks (may also be considered tertiary) ➤ Commentaries and reviews	Overview or summary that compile, synthesize, and combine both primary and secondary sources ➤ Encyclopedias, dictionaries, atlases, handbooks ➤ Annotated bibliographies, indexes, chronologies
Currency & Proximity	Tend to come first in the publication cycle; close to or immediate to the time period and/or event(s)	Tend to come second in the publication cycle; vary from close to or far-removed from originating time period and/or event(s)	Tend to come last in the publication cycle; far-removed from originating time period and/or event(s)
Purpose, Point of View & Tone	Often fits in one of the following categories: a) Subjective, first-person narration; b) Creative writing; c) Neutral, detached reporting	• Written in argumentative and analytical tone • Typically builds on past and/or current discourse • Often aims to counter, extend, and/or supplant previous works	• Factual, objective and concise with emphasis on distilling multiple sources • Broad, general focus • Lacks analysis and critique

2) Typical Formats

Primary	Secondary	Tertiary/Reference
• Diaries, memoirs, and autobiography • Letters and personal correspondence • Original works of art and literature (i.e. painting, sculpture, film, novels) • Patents, raw data, and lab reports	• Articles in scholarly/academic journals (peer-reviewed studies, editorials, reviews) • Articles in trade/professional journals • Scholarly/academic or popular/mainstream books of criticism and interpretation • Academic theses and dissertations	• Abstracts and bibliographies • Atlases, timelines and chronologies • Dictionaries and glossaries • Encyclopedias • Handbooks, guidebooks, and manuals

3) Examples by Discipline/Subject Area

Definitions may vary according to the specific context in which a source is being used; often, this is dependent on the subject area or discipline of study.

Subject	Primary	Secondary	Tertiary/Reference
Victorian Literature	• Novels, plays, poems and/or correspondence written in the Victorian era	• Scholarly articles and books analyzing literary works, culture, history and/or politics of the Victorian era • Formal biographies of Victorian period writers	A reference work or encyclopedia with coverage of the social, political, and intellectual landscape of the Victorian period, for example: ➢ Encyclopedia of the Victorian Era
Medicine	• A chart or report of findings from a trial for a new drug treatment	• Scholarly, peer-reviewed research studies about the condition and/or similar drug treatments	Dictionary or index of drug treatments, for example: ➢ Canadian Pharmacist's Association's *Compendium of Pharmaceuticals & Specialties* (e-CPS)
Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)	• Case notes or observations taken by a clinical psychologist • Firsthand accounts by sufferers of PTSD	• Scholarly research studies, textbooks, and books about PTSD	Textbook or manual of psychological disorders, for example: ➢ American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5)