

# What is a Primary Source?

*"Being helpless, I wanted to make sure there was a clear record of what was going on down there."*

**Robert A. Tur**, a traffic reporter, testifying about the videotape shot from a helicopter of the bombing of Reginald Denny.

There are three types of sources used in historical research.

## I. Primary Sources

A primary source is a document or other sort of evidence written or created during the time under study. Primary sources offer an inside view of a particular event.

Examples:

**Original documents** (excerpts or translations acceptable)  
Diaries, speeches, letters, minutes, interviews,  
news film footage, autobiographies, official records

**Creative works** poetry, drama, novels, music, art

**Relics or artifacts** jewelry, pottery, furniture,  
clothing, buildings

Examples of primary sources:

Diary of Anne Frank - experiences of Jews in World War II  
The Declaration of Independence - U. S. history  
Plato's *Republic* - women in ancient Greece  
Bible - Hebrew customs in biblical times

## II. Secondary Sources

A secondary source interprets and analyzes primary sources. Secondary sources are one step removed from the event.

Examples:

textbooks, journal articles, histories, literary criticism,  
commentaries, and encyclopedia entries

## III. Finding Sources

Access tools lead to primary or secondary sources. For example, the UNR Libraries' online catalog will find works by Aristotle (primary source/author search) or works about him (secondary source/subject or LC subject searches).

Examples:

magazine/journal indexes (paperbound, CD-ROM or online via NEON), bibliographies, and catalogs (online or card)

## Is It a Scholarly Journal or a Popular Magazine?

Articles in journals, magazines and newspapers provide the most recent material on a subject, trace trends of thought about a topic over time, supplement professional literature, and cover subjects too new, obscure or temporary to be available in books. The following guidelines will help distinguish between popular magazines and scholarly journals.

	Scholarly Journals	Popular Magazines
<b>Index Source:</b>	Subject oriented indexes: ERIC, Humanities Index, etc.	General indexes; Readers Guide to Periodical Literature
<b>Publisher:</b>	Professional/scholarly society or academic press	Commercial publisher
<b>Audience:</b>	Specialized	General readership
<b>Vocabulary:</b>	Formal language, jargon, advanced terminology	Informal language, minimal jargon
<b>Purpose:</b>	Share research data, cover trends in an academic area	Entertainment and current events coverage
<b>Article Traits:</b>	Title reflects content. Introduction and/or literature review; theory or background; subjects; methods; results; discussion; references or bibliography; supporting diagrams or illustrations. Preceded by an abstract. Based on original research or authorities in the field	Colorful title. Straightforward essay sometimes accompanied with colorful photographs  Rarely preceded by an abstract  Based on personal opinion
<b>Author:</b>	Credentials listed	Sometimes unknown; few credentials listed
<b>Sponsorship:</b>	Academic/research-oriented ads (if any)	Wide variety of ads for different products and services
<b>Physical Traits:</b>	Plain binding; inexpensive paper; few color photos	Attractive binding, many color photos
<b>Article Selection:</b>	"Refereed" by an editorial board of scholarly reviewers (a "juried" journal)	Editor(s) review freelance manuscripts