

Secondary Sources

A secondary source is a source that was not created firsthand by someone who participated in the historical era. Secondary sources are usually created by historians, but are based on the historian's reading of primary sources. Secondary sources are usually written decades, if not centuries, after the event occurred by people who did not live through or participate in the event or issue. Secondary sources are works of synthesis and interpretation based upon primary sources and the work of other authors.

They may take a variety of forms. The authors of secondary sources develop their interpretations and narratives of events based on primary sources, that is, documents and other evidence created by participants or eyewitnesses. Frequently, they also take advantage of the work of other historians by using other secondary sources. For example, the author of the history textbook that you use in school probably did not use too many primary sources. Instead, textbook authors usually rely on secondary sources written by other historians. Given the wide range of topics covered by a typical textbook, textbook authors could not possibly find and use all the relevant primary sources themselves.

The purpose of a secondary source is to help build the story of your research from multiple perspectives and to give your research historical context.

An example of a secondary source is *Battle Cry of Freedom: The Civil War Era* by James M. McPherson, published in 1988. Secondary sources are a great starting point in helping you see the big picture. Understanding the context of your topic will help you make sense of the primary sources that you find.

The primary and secondary sources McPherson used are listed in the bibliography. Another researcher might consult these same primary sources and reach a different conclusion.

Tertiary Sources

Tertiary sources are based on a collection of primary and secondary sources and may or may not be written by an expert. Tertiary sources should never appear in your bibliography and are only used as exploratory sources, to give you ideas about what to research. Wikipedia is not a reliable source and should not be utilized or appear in your bibliography.

Examples are dictionaries, encyclopedias, fact books, and guidebooks.