How to Research Secondary Sources

The distinction between primary and secondary sources is a basic aspect of the study of history. Here, we survey secondary sources.

What Are Secondary Sources?

Secondary sources are accounts of the past created by people writing about events some time after they happened. The crucial thing about them is their relationship in time to the events under consideration. They may be based on primary sources, though this is not always the case. Like primary sources, they may be published or unpublished.

Examples of Secondary Sources

Secondary sources also come in a great variety of forms. We are perhaps most likely to encounter them as books. Perhaps the classic type of secondary source is the monograph, a book–length study of a single subject, normally based at least in part on primary sources. (Monographs will usually draw on secondary sources as well.) Other types of secondary sources include books on broader topics, which are often syntheses of monographs (though they may also utilize research in primary sources) and textbooks, which tend to be largely based on other secondary sources. Another type of secondary source that students might find useful is the anthology. This is a collection of chapter–length articles, typically grouped around a general topic, and often written by different authors. All of the above are typically written by serious historians and will contain in footnotes, endnotes, and/or bibliographies evidence of the sources–primary and secondary–on which they are based. More popular works of history–that is those intended for the general reading public who are looking primarily for a good story–might not provide much insight into their sources. While they may provide an enjoyable read, it is often difficult to evaluate the research on which they are based and thus the soundness of their conclusions.

Books, of course, are not the only type of secondary sources. Another very important type that contributes much to the writing of academic history is the scholarly article. These articles are typically published in scholarly journals. There are hundreds of these journals around, ranging from flagship publications such as the American Historical Review to the publications of local historical societies. Many of them are sponsored by professional organizations of historians (the aforementioned AHR is published for the American Historical Association). Some, again like the AHR, publish work in all fields of history, while others are more specialized and limit their publications to particular fields of study. French Historical Studies, for example, limits itself to French history.

Scholarly journals are typically peer–reviewed. Articles submitted to them are sent to recognized scholars in the field for review prior to publication. The bread and butter of scholarly journals is the learned article, typically based on research in primary sources. Thus, the articles thus are secondary sources. They are an important source of professional writing in history. Very often, new findings or interpretations will appear first in article form before becoming a book. Sometimes scholarly journals will publish newly uncovered primary sources. Scholarly journals
also provide other useful material. Many of them publish book reviews. Related types of publications are review articles, which typically cover two or more books on similar topics, and historiographical essays, which survey recent writing in a whole field. All of these can be very helpful in acquiring a feel for the historiography of a particular topic.

While secondary sources are usually thought of in terms of book or article publications, there are also unpublished secondary sources. These include doctoral dissertations and masters theses, reports done for government agencies (such as the National Park Service, for example), private organizations and businesses, and even student papers.

**Gray Areas**

The distinction between primary and secondary sources is not always as clear–cut as the foregoing examples might lead you to believe. Like much else in studying history, much depends on context. *Newspapers*, for example, are usually considered to be primary sources. They certainly are when they provide contemporaneous accounts, even when the accounts are not by eye witnesses. Advertisements in newspapers are primary sources for the social and economic history of the day. However, when newspapers run stories about the more distant past—say on the tenth anniversary of a famous event or the anniversary of a town's founding, those stories are likely secondary accounts. (Of course, if they include reprints of news coverage of the original event, then those aspects can be considered primary sources.)

Another sometimes gray area is that of *memoirs and autobiographies*. On the one hand, they are written by people who had first hand knowledge of historical events and for this reason are often classified as primary sources.

On the other hand, they are often written long after the events with which they deal and are subject to the imperfections of memory and to the influence of other people's opinions about past events. They also sometimes cover events of which the author had no first hand knowledge. All of this gives them a sort of hybrid character, combining aspects of both primary and secondary sources.

**Using Secondary Sources**

Historians often think of primary sources as the foundations of historical knowledge and tend to prefer them to secondary sources. Students, however, should not underestimate the amount of material to be found in secondary sources. They are often more available than primary sources, especially the unpublished primary sources. Like primary sources, secondary sources should be read with a critical eye. Since they are written intentionally, it is always useful to ask oneself what the author is trying to achieve. Keeping in mind the author's background, if known, is also useful. (It might be noted that the "Time and Place Rule" does not really apply to secondary sources as it does to primary ones.)