

## Choosing the Best Information Source for Your Academic Research Assignment

*Just as you wouldn't go to a store that doesn't sell what you want to purchase, you wouldn't go to an information source that doesn't offer the kind of information you need. To know what kinds of information various sources offer (and don't offer), see the explanations in the table below to choose the best source for the information you need:*

Information Source	Best For...	When news of an event is likely to be covered...	Watch For/ Consider...
<p><b>Newspapers (usually published daily or weekly)</b> These can be considered primary or secondary sources (primary if reporting eyewitness accounts)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Daily local, national, and international news, events, and editorial coverage</li> <li>• Statistics and photojournalism</li> <li>• Record of events and quotes from experts, officials, and witnesses Primary source material (first-hand or eyewitness accounts)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Within the week of the event (sometimes the following day)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Authors usually not experts</li> <li>• If a story is breaking, corrections to initial report likely</li> <li>• Editorial bias of a publication</li> </ul>
<p><b>Popular Magazines</b> These are usually considered secondary sources</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Current information</li> <li>• Short, easy to understand articles (including analysis, interviews, opinions, etc.)</li> <li>• Photographs and illustrations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The week after the event</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Authors usually not experts</li> <li>• Sources not always cited</li> <li>• Editorial bias of a publication</li> </ul>
<p><b>Professional/ Trade Magazines</b> These are usually considered secondary sources</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Current information</li> <li>• Specialized articles related to a particular discipline or profession (including context and analysis)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Weeks or several months after the event</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Articles vary between short and easy to lengthy and highly specific</li> <li>• Sources not always cited</li> <li>• Has characteristics in common with both popular magazines and scholarly journals</li> </ul>

Information Source (cont.)	Best For...	When news of an event is likely to be covered...	Watch For/ Consider...
<p><b>Scholarly/ Academic Journals</b> These can be considered either primary or secondary sources, depending on the discipline. If they report original findings/research, or contribute new information to the field, they are often considered primary. If they are reviews/analysis of existing research, they are considered secondary.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recent research on a topic</li> <li>• Focused, peer-reviewed articles written by experts</li> <li>• Data, statistics, charts, and graphs</li> <li>• Bibliographies of other sources</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Months after the event</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Terminology and/or data may be difficult for novices to understand</li> </ul>
<p><b>Books</b> These are usually considered secondary sources</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Comprehensive overview of topic</li> <li>• Background and historical context</li> <li>• Bibliographies of other sources</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A year or more later</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dated information</li> <li>• Bias (dependent on author, publisher, etc.)</li> </ul>
<p><b>Websites</b> These are usually considered secondary sources, unless they are blogs, contain e-diaries, transcripts of speeches, etc.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• News</li> <li>• Government information</li> <li>• Company information</li> <li>• Alternate points of view</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The day of the event</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Credibility and accuracy cannot always be assured</li> <li>• Bias (dependent on author, publisher, etc.)</li> <li>• Sources not always cited</li> </ul>

<b>Primary Sources</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Firsthand testimony or direct evidence of news/events: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Usually created by witnesses who experienced the events being documented. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Examples include diaries, letters, speeches, newspaper articles, recordings, photographs, paintings, documents, manuscripts, transcripts, autobiographies, artifacts, emails, Facebook pages, etc.</li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Often close to the time of the news/event (such as through diaries, quotes in newspaper articles, etc.)</li> <li>• In some instances long after the fact by witnesses of the events (such as in memoirs, oral histories, autobiographies, etc.)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reflects individual viewpoints of participants or observers, but is not necessarily a consensus of all observers.</li> <li>• Mistakenly interpreting these primary sources in the light of today's cultural, moral, and other values rather than on the values held at the time the primary source was produced.</li> </ul>
<b>Information Source (cont.)</b>	<b>Best For...</b>	<b>When news of an event is likely to be covered...</b>	<b>Watch For/ Consider...</b>
<b>Secondary Sources</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Secondhand testimony and interpretation of events for which the author was not present. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ These are helpful for providing context, perspective, and interpretation of events from a bit of distance. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Examples include biographies, history books, magazine articles, journal articles, web sites, documentaries, etc.</li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some length of time after the fact, sometimes many years afterward</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interpretations vary, and distance from an event creates a difference in interpretation. Be aware that today's cultural, moral, and other values may differ greatly from the values held at the time a primary source was produced.</li> </ul>

*This table is adapted from the [Select the Best Information Source](#) table, [The Information Cycle](#) page from the University Library at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and the Purdue University's [Primary Sources in Archives & Special Collections: What is a Secondary Source](#) web page..*