



Durham
University



Skills:

Using Sources

Using Sources

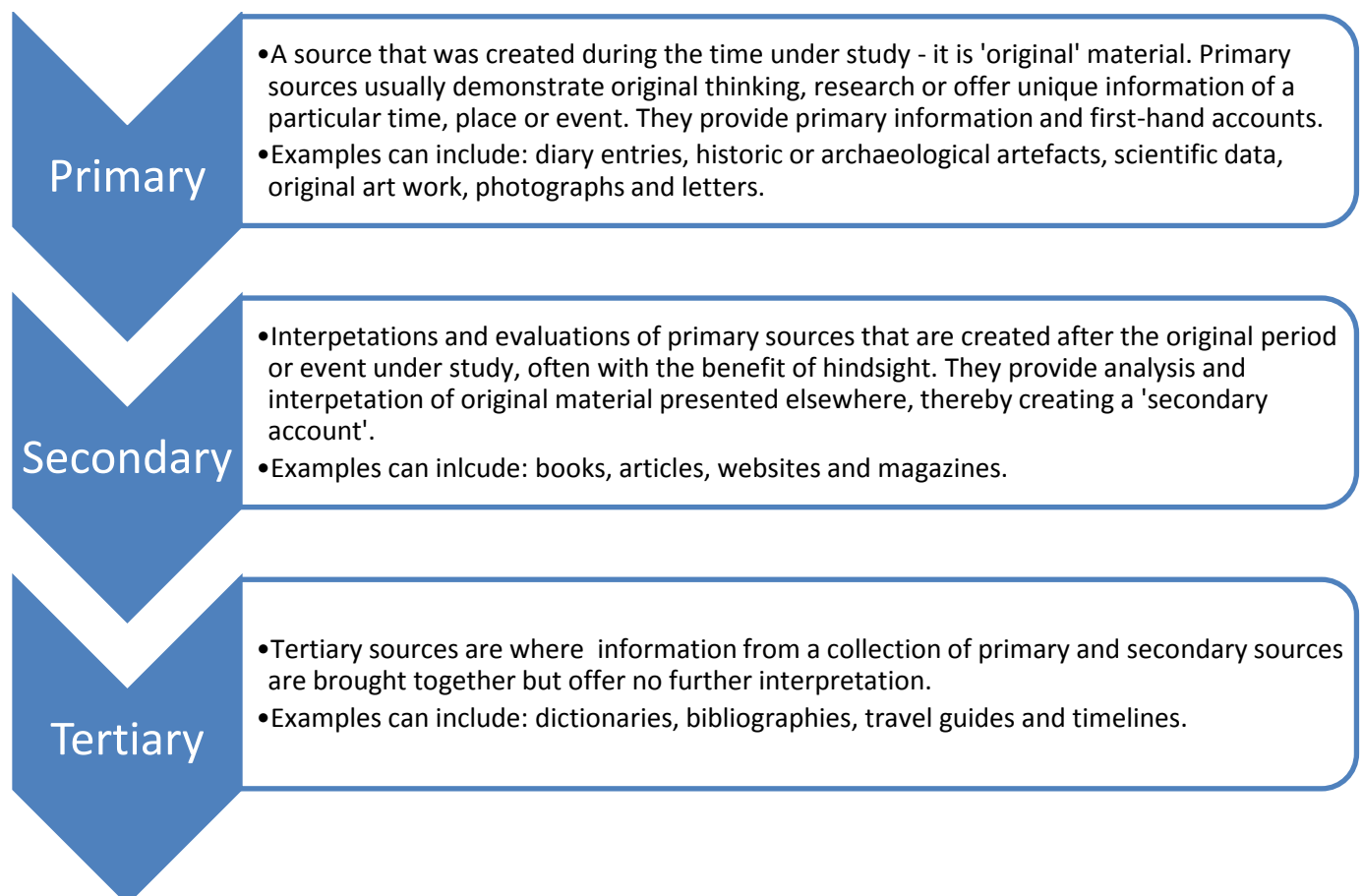
Whatever kind of work you are doing, you are likely to need to consult one or more 'sources'. A source is very simply *'a place, person, or thing from which something originates or can be obtained'*.

You will encounter your greatest number of sources when writing an essay or putting together a project – no matter what subject you are taking although you are perhaps more likely to consult a greater number of sources for arts and humanities subjects like history. Many people don't appreciate the great number of things that can be considered a 'source' of information but understanding this will enable you to consult a greater variety of sources, demonstrate greater breadth and depth of topic understanding and ultimately, hand in a more informed piece of work.

Type of Source

First, it's important to understand the difference between a **primary**, **secondary** and to a lesser extent, **tertiary** source.

The best work will benefit from both the inclusion of and your analysis of as many primary sources as possible but this is not always easy, or in some cases, possible.



The only thing to be aware of regarding primary, secondary and tertiary sources is that each is relative and dependant on context, i.e. it may depend what you're working on as to whether a source is considered primary or secondary / secondary or tertiary.

Consider this example:

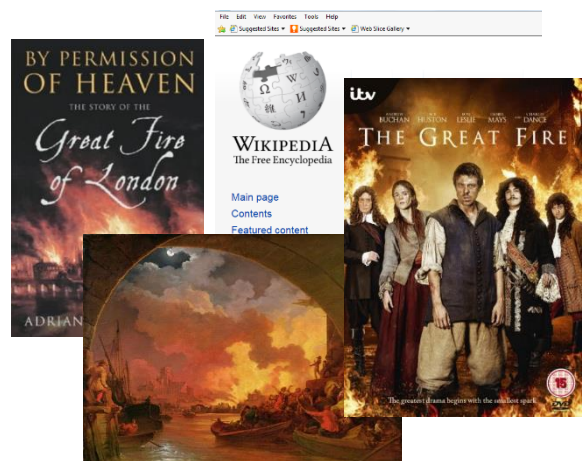
Project Title: The Great Fire of London

Primary = original paintings, maps, Samuel Pepys diary entries, artefacts from the fire, original government reports into the causes of the fire, Bills of Mortality.







Secondary = Later paintings, books, DVDs, websites etc.


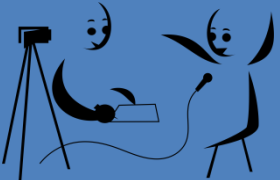


If, however, the project title had been: *How is The Great Fire of London Presented in Modern Media* – these books, DVDs and websites would become primary sources of information because they give you first hand information on your topic of study. As a general rule, view as much original source material as possible.



Examples of Sources

Below you will find examples and descriptions of many of the sources you will come across as part of your research, including some advantages and disadvantages of each. This list is in no way exhaustive but should give you an idea of the breadth of sources you may be able to consult and utilise for your work.

Source	Description	Advantages	Disadvantages
Book 	<p>A handwritten or printed piece of fiction or non-fiction.</p>	<p>Usually detailed containing a significant amount of research. Usually easy to find in shops, libraries or online.</p>	<p>Depending on the topic, books may date quickly – particularly true of science books. Often have one author who will have at least some personal bias throughout. Books can be extremely in-depth on a topic and require good research skills to extract what's relevant.</p>
Journal/Article 	<p>A journal is a peer-reviewed periodical relating to a particular discipline or field of study. It contains articles.</p>	<p>Trustworthy content due to being peer-reviewed. Published regularly – the newest research will be published via articles in journals. Often available online.</p>	<p>Content may need to be purchased or accessed via a University or other library that subscribes to that journal. There can be a lot of content to search through (but keyword searches are usually available). Authors will write with an assumed knowledge on behalf of the reader so you may come across words, concepts or theories you are not yet familiar with.</p>
Field/Site Reports 	<p>Formal reports and communications written by on-site staff. E.g. an archaeological site report.</p>	<p>Written by the people actually doing the original work on a site – information is first hand from them and may include original drawings, sketches and notes.</p>	<p>Can be technical as not written for the general public. Can be difficult to find as earlier work can remain unpublished and is not yet digitised.</p>
Webpages 	<p>Online from content from websites.</p>	<p>Exceptional quantities of information available and mostly free of charge. Easy to access and some high quality information is available.</p>	<p>Many – if you don't critically evaluate what you are looking at. Amongst all the good stuff is a great deal of bad. Often poorly referenced or not at all. Can be overwhelming.</p>

<p>Artefact</p> 	<p>An object made by a human being, typically one of cultural or historical interest.</p>	<p>Free of others interpretation. Often available to access (at least view) in museums and galleries.</p>	<p>May be difficult to arrange access if not usually on display. May include languages, symbols etc. that you are unfamiliar with and so need further interpretation.</p>
<p>Interview</p> 	<p>Where a conversation takes place (and may have been recorded) with specific questions asked of a person.</p>	<p>The person interviewed has usually played a key role in an event and can offer eye witness accounts and first hand information of an event or perhaps of a place or another person of interest.</p>	<p>Interviews with specific people still rely on that person's memory, interpretation, bias, agenda etc. Older recordings may be difficult to get hold of unless they have been digitised and available online.</p>
<p>Podcast</p> 	<p>A digital audio file available on the internet.</p>	<p>Available online to stream or download. Easy to find and mostly free. They contain material that is likely to have been more recently interpreted and may offer different views and ways of looking at material. Often released at regular intervals and can contain very new research.</p>	<p>Podcasts sometimes present original information but if they reconsider or re-evaluate older material, again, look for agendas and bias – why has it been created? Problems can arise with poor internet connections but often podcasts can be downloaded when connected to wifi and listened to later offline.</p>
<p>TV/Film</p> 	<p>A segment of content (TV) or visual recording of a story or event available for viewing.</p>	<p>The library of TV and film is huge which can be very beneficial. New TV and film material is often easy to view either in a cinema, on freeview TV or even online and through catch up services. A lot of old TV and film material has been digitised and is available to view online or in dedicated, freely accessible venues (see further resources).</p>	<p>The back catalogue of film and TV is so huge, not all has been digitised or made freely available. It can be hard to search for TV programmes that were aired many years ago. Documentaries can be very informative but consider their agenda and time at which they were made (political/social issues). Early information films can be very insightful but remember that <i>most</i> TV and film is made to make money so check the facts – have things been over dramatised for a paying audience?</p>

Photographs



A picture made using a camera

Fantastic snapshots of people, times and places. Can give you a real and usually honest insight. Requires your own interpretation.

Can be difficult to access any photographs that are not yet digitised but huge amounts are. Consider visiting a local archive for locally related topics. Some photography (especially modern) can be intentionally misleading but this is less of an issue the further back in time you go, although image quality can also be a problem.

Maps



A diagrammatic representation of an area of land or sea showing physical features, cities, roads, etc.

Often available in local archives or online. Maps of the same place from different years can show significant changes to a local area. There's more to learn than simply geography from a map – political, social, economic factors of an area can be well reflected.

Often require significant interpretation and the ability to 'read' the map. Historical maps can look very different to modern ones so this is a skill to learn. Place names have sometimes changed or are spelled differently when looking at historical maps. Accuracy of map drawing has improved dramatically in the last century.

Newspapers



A printed publication (usually issued daily or weekly) containing news, articles, advertisements, and correspondence.

Huge archives of newspapers exist and are available through libraries and online. Many are published daily or weekly meaning the information contained within them is very specific and relevant to that time. There are huge numbers of contributors and types of features.

Newspapers always have some sort of agenda and bias, particularly those with a particular political leaning – all content then should be viewed with this understanding. Because newspapers are so linked to their specific time and are often very reactionary, bear in mind that some content may be inaccurate and need to be followed up with later publications as more facts on a particular event etc. come to light. Because of the huge number of newspapers published, it is helpful to know exactly what you are looking for OR know exactly which time frame you need to search through.

Can I Trust This?

Knowing whether or not you can trust a source can be very difficult, depending on what it is but it is primarily a case of common sense. As a general rule, any article that has been peer reviewed (other people of equal standing in a field will read a submitted copy and then send back notes with comments and suggestions), or book written by a known author that you can research further and published by a well known and respected publishing company, is probably a trustworthy source of information. You should however, still approach the work critically and ask these questions:

Who has written it?

Why have they written it?

What type of source is it?

Where is it published?

When was it written?

and finally...

How is it relevant to my research?

Who, why, what, where, when and how questions are relevant to any type of source you consult.

The most difficult type of source to use is perhaps one from the internet such as a webpage. Remember, the internet can be accessed, and much of it edited, by anybody with an internet connection so don't take anything at face value – always look a little closer. There are a number of online webpages dedicated to satirical news (designed to be funny or ironic and designed to expose and provoke what are considered to be ignorant or ridiculous views, particularly used in relation to politics). Mostly these websites and stories are easy to spot, but a surprising number of people can be taken in, especially if you know nothing about the topic under discussion. Popular examples of these websites include:



and



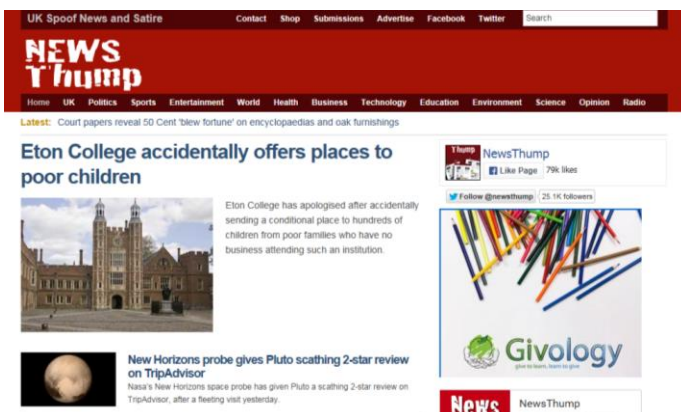
Websites of this nature will state that they are satirical, but it may be hard to see or in small letters!

Others are often designed to mimic genuine news websites that are trustworthy such as this example:



Genuine BBC news

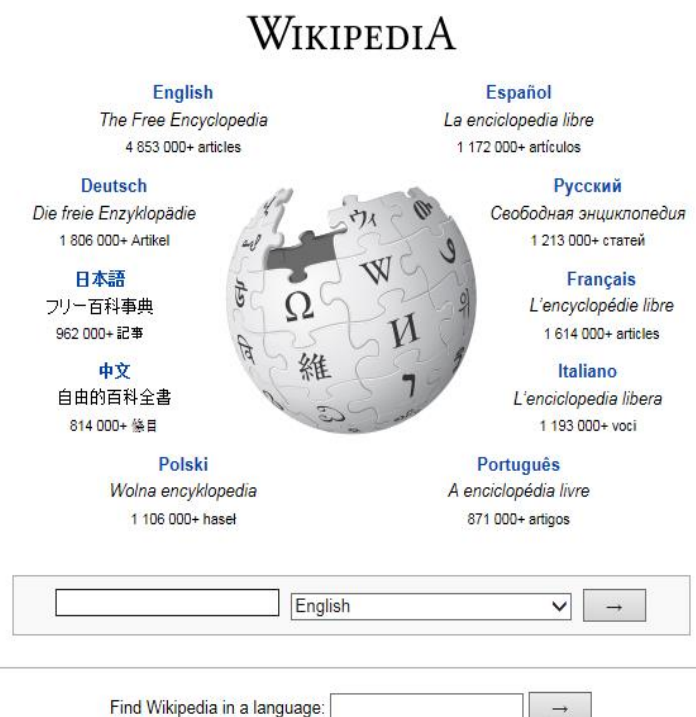
vs



News Thump

Perhaps the most controversial of all is Wikipedia. Almost everybody will consult Wikipedia at some point and that's fine as a starting point but **under no circumstances should Wikipedia be used to write an essay and be referenced as a source.** The most you should use Wikipedia for is as a quick introduction to a topic and to follow links to original sources which you should then go and find for yourself.

Anybody can write and edit a Wikipedia entry – that's partly what makes it so accessible and so popular (and of course, it's free). There have been studies done on the reliability of Wikipedia and on the whole, certainly in relation to scientific research, it has been found to be mostly accurate BUT not completely and unless you know so much about a topic that you can spot the errors that might be hiding in the Wiki entry you're reading...go to the original source and rely on your own ability to extract and analyse the information.



There used to be dedicated websites you could consult which told you which other websites were trustworthy for the purpose of research. Unfortunately these are now largely non-existent due to the speed at which the internet has grown. It used to be thought we could catalogue the whole web but a simple Google search for 'cats' should demonstrate just how huge the internet now is...

Please feel free to visit our subject information pages found on the Durham University Library homepage as these can help guide you towards relevant and trustworthy sources of information.

Know what you are reading, watching, or listening to.

Further Resources

Further definition of primary and secondary sources:

- <http://www.princeton.edu/~refdesk/primary2.html>
- <http://www.lib.umd.edu/tl/guides/primary-sources>

Discover Durham Collections (online database of Durham University's museum objects):

http://discover.durham.ac.uk/primo_library/libweb/action/search.do

Durham University Library subject information page:

<https://www.dur.ac.uk/library/resources/subject/>

Havard Guide to Using Sources:

<http://usingsources.fas.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do?keyword=k70847&tabgroupid=icb.tabgroup107786>

Kent College Independent Learning Guide:

<http://www.kent-college.co.uk/lib/sixth%20form/independent%20learning%20guide.pdf>

Snopes:

<http://m.snopes.com/whats-new/>

Examples of trustworthy websites:

BBC:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/>

GOV.UK:

<https://www.gov.uk/>

New Scientist (requires subscription):

<https://www.newscientist.com/>

National Geographic:

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/>

Met Office:

<http://www.metoffice.gov.uk/>