Source of clarification:
Primary, secondary, tertiary sources - what’s the difference?

Your professor assigns a research paper that requires you to use a primary source, two secondary sources, and a tertiary source. Where do you find them?

Primary sources are publications that contain original content published for the first time. They are the original publication of a researcher’s data and conclusions. Scholarly journals that use the peer review process, by which articles are evaluated prior to publication, are considered primary sources. In historical research, primary sources can be diaries, letters, photographs, artifacts, and more.

Secondary sources are publications summarizing and pointing to the primary literature after it appears. Article databases, in which you can search many journals to find articles, are secondary sources. Review articles are a type of secondary literature because they summarize and point to the primary literature after it has appeared. Meta-analysis articles use a statistical technique to summarize and review previous quantitative research. Both provide excellent background material by pulling together all the latest research on a topic. The content of newspapers and popular magazines is secondary literature, i.e. about the research of others rather than the original reports.

Tertiary sources are publications that summarize and point to the primary literature, but generally only after it has become widely accepted and believed. Reference books like handbooks, encyclopedias, and textbooks, are all good sources for background information.

Quiz Yourself! Are the following sources considered primary (P), secondary (S) or tertiary (T)?


New Trial Databases
Check them out!
(on website under “News - Preview Test Electronic Resources”)

Global Issues In Context -- Social & Cultural History
-- Mosby's Nursing Skills -- Parliamentary Papers -- Procedures Consult -- Rehabilitation Reference Center

Please let us know what you think! Email library@une.edu