Different Kinds of Academic Sources, and How to Find Them

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When doing academic research, it is important to know the difference between the different kinds of texts that you will encounter. There are at least two reasons for this. First, some sources are much more worthy of your attention and trust than others, and it is useful to have some ability to decide what to read and how much to trust it. Second, you should aim to use different sources in different ways: some texts can be cited as evidence for your own claims, and some are useful mainly as tools for finding other texts that you can cite.

Both knowing what to read and trust and knowing how to best find and use sources are things that take lots of practice to get good at. My hope is that this document will be a useful beginner's guide.[1]

Primary, Secondary, and Tertiary Sources

This is an important but imprecise distinction. It concerns the degree to which a text is removed from the original research on which it is based:

- A **primary source** is the first place where original research is reported. "Original research" can mean a couple of things. In the sciences, it normally involves conducting experiments or processing data that the researchers have gathered. In philosophy and the other humanities, original research will often mainly involve the articulation of new theories and/or arguments. Any text that is the first place where the result of either of these kinds of research is described is a primary source. Many academic journals specialize

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[1] Please keep in mind that this advice is geared toward the disciplines in which I normally teach and do my own research: philosophy and certain related scientific disciplines, such as linguistics and psychology. All of my examples will come from this area, and although much of what I say may apply more broadly, things will no doubt differ in other fields.

in publishing articles that report on original research. In philosophy and the other humanities (but less commonly in the sciences or social sciences), it is also common to publish original research in books called "scholarly monographs."

- The purpose of a **secondary source** is to act as a guide to the research on a certain topic by citing and summarizing selection of the the primary sources on that topic, and explaining the debates that are going on in the literature. A secondary source may also be opinionated, in the sense that it may be arguing that one side of the debate it is summarizing is winning. A few scholarly journals specialize in publishing high quality secondary sources. Books described in their titles as "handbooks," "guidebooks," and "companions" are usually edited collections of secondary sources by different authors on a cluster of related topics. Some single-authored books are mainly extended reviews of large bodies of primary sources, and these are likewise secondary sources. Finally, philosophy has several excellent online encyclopedias and compendium of annotated bibliographies that are essentially collections of secondary sources.

- **Tertiary sources** aren't always distinguished from secondary sources, and there is no sharp boundary between the two categories. When the distinction is made, tertiary sources are usually taken to be a category of texts that is even further removed from primary sources than standard secondary sources are. For example, introductory textbooks, some encyclopedias, and articles and books written for non-specialist audiences usually aren't concerned with giving exhaustive and rigorous overviews of the research on a topic. Rather, their purpose is to offer an easy-to-digest introduction.

There are some important complications to this three-way division of sources. First, as I have already said, the distinctions are vague, and there are borderline cases. Second, it is common for a paper to contain a mix of original research and a summary of other research on the same topic. For example, many scientific journal articles, whose main purpose is to present original research, include a section near the beginning that summarizes and cites previous research on the same and related topics. Rather than dividing entire texts into the three

categories listed above, then, it might make more sense to say that texts can be *both* primary sources of information about some research (the research that they are presenting for the first time), and secondary sources about other research (the other research that they summarize). In practice, we tend to use "secondary source" to refer only to texts that are not primary sources of information about any research, and so serve only as secondary sources.

How to use secondary and tertiary sources

Secondary and tertiary sources are extremely useful, but it is important to know how to use them. The most important things that secondary sources do is to guide us to primary sources on a topic. When I am learning about a new topic and I want to know which primary sources to read, the first thing I do is to track down a couple of good secondary sources to use as guides to the literature. In addition to telling me which primary sources are worth reading, a good, recent secondary source will also put them in context, telling me how up to date they are, whether there have been any notable responses or contrary evidence, and which questions on a topic still remain unanswered. This is useful for helping me to know how to approach primary sources.

What you should *not* do is cite a secondary or tertiary source as if it were a primary source. For example, if you find an encyclopedia article discussing universal grammar that summarizes a study done by Lila Gleitmann, and you want to use Gleitmann's research as evidence in your own paper, you should *not* cite the encyclopedia article directly. Rather, you should use the encyclopedia article's bibliography to find the original study by Gleitmann, read it, and then cite that. The main reason for this approach is that secondary sources sometimes leave out or misrepresent important details in their summaries of original research, and it's hard to know which of these details will be relevant to your paper unless you go and check. Another reason to cite primary sources is that it is important to give credit to people who actually did the research that you're citing. In general, citing a secondary source instead of a primary source is a sign that you're doing lazy research.

Does this mean that you should never cite a secondary source at all? Not quite. Sometimes you might want to make a broad claim about the current state of research in an area. For example, maybe your claim is that most recent work on language acquisition supports a certain theory. This is not a claim about any one piece of research, and so it would be inappropriate to cite any one primary source, or even a small number of them. One thing you could do would be to cite lots and lots of primary sources all at once, but that would take up a lot of space and it would be a lot of work. But if you can find a secondary source that has already surveyed all of the work you're talking about, and showed how it supports your generalization, then it makes sense to cite the secondary source in that case.

All of this goes for tertiary sources as well. But you have to be even more careful with tertiary sources, because they often make no attempt to cover the primary texts on their topics comprehensively, and their claims may sometimes be based on readings of secondary sources rather than direct engagement with primary sources. The general point of this section, then, is that when you're using a piece of research or an argument as support in a paper, there's no substitute for finding, reading, and citing the primary source in which it first appeared.

About Wikipedia

Wikipedia is an incredibly useful resource—probably the single most important source of information in the world. I use it all the time, including when I am doing scholarly research, and you should probably use it too. However, you may have been told by other professors not to use or cite Wikipedia. So what gives?

The most important thing is not to *misuse* Wikipedia. This is partly just a matter of following my advice in the previous section: Wikipedia is not a primary source. (It describes itself as a tertiary source.) So you should almost never cite a Wikipedia article directly. Instead, you should use it as a way of finding primary sources and better secondary sources.

But Wikipedia is also complicated in its own unique ways. The best secondary and tertiary sources have been written by experts on their topic, and have then been vetted by editors and peer reviewers who are also experts. This normally won't make them perfect, but it has the effect of encouraging comprehensiveness, objectivity, and good citation practices. There is no guarantee of this kind of vetting on Wikipedia. That said, large entries with lots of contributors paying attention to them sometimes make up for this downside by having lots and lots of people who are constantly looking out for mistakes. But particularly when it comes to articles that have had relatively few contributions by a relatively small number of people, you should treat what you read there with an extra grain of salt. For example, many articles on philosophical topics just aren't very comprehensive or accurate.

How to find good primary sources

The main way that I wind up reading a primary source is by seeing it cited and discussed in other sources. If I see the same article mentioned several times in support of some idea that interests me, this makes me want to check it out for myself, and so I track it down. In general, I think that most students tend to ignore bibliographies when reading, the way you might ignore the copyright notice on the inside of the first page. But if you're trying to do scholaship, you have to treat the bibliography as one of the most valuable sources of information in a text.

A second useful trick for finding sources is to look up articles that have cited things you've already read. For example, suppose you are reading a paper from a decade ago and you're wondering whether there is more recent work that challenges it. One way to find out is to check who has cited the paper you're reading. You can easily do this by looking the paper up on Google Scholar and then clicking on the citation count for that paper in the results. This will give you a list of the articles that have cited it, and will even allow you to search within the results to narrow them down.

Of course, these methods are useful only once you've already found some things to read on a given topic. What if you're just getting started? What I usually do in that case is look for one or two good secondary sources that summarize work on the topic that I want to learn about, and use those as a guide to the primary sources. (On finding secondary sources, see the next section.)

If the above strategies aren't getting you what you want, you might have to try searching through journal articles yourself. This can be very difficult and intimidating, especially in fields about which you are not already knowledgable, as it will often require searching through what seems to be an endless list of articles without knowing the best search terms and without knowing much about what to look for as signs of quality. Still, there is sometimes no substitute.

If you find yourself searching for articles, Google Scholar can be very useful due to its advanced search features and extremely broad coverage of different disciplines. But there are also some good discipline-specific databases where you can search for articles and find download links. PhilPapers.org is the best one for philosophy. LingBuzz is a good one for linguistics. APA Psychnet is a good one for psychology.

How to find good secondary sources

There are many good places to look for high-quality secondary sources. Here I will focus on venues that publish high-quality surveys of topics in philosophy, linguistics, and cognitive science. You can search within these to find specific topics (this may require some skill, and a few tries with different terminology).

Journals that specialize in high-quality secondary texts

Philosophy Compass
Trends in Cognitive Science
Annual Review of Psychology
Language and Linguistics Compass

Online encyclopedias

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy
The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy

Collections of annotated bibliographies

Oxford Bibliographies Online

Handbooks, Companions, Guides, etc.

Most academic publishers have collections of secondary sources called "handbooks," "guides," or "companions." For example, Oxford University Press has an extensive series of handbooks, including whole sub-series on philosophy, linguistics, and psychology. Routledge and Cambridge University Press have similarly extensive series of similar kinds (note that Cambridge calls them "handbooks" for psychology and linguistics but "companions" for philosophy).

Get advice from your professors!

Doing research is difficult, especially at first and on new topics. There is a seemingly endless amount of work out there to look through, and it is very difficult to estimate about how trustworthy a source is before reading it. This makes it hard to make efficient use of your limited time. However, these things get easier as you learn more about the different authors, journals, and topics that you're researching. For this reason, it's a good idea to get help from people with more research experience than you. Of course, this is not a substitute for doing your own research, since learning to do it yourself is one point of a course like this one. But it can be a good idea to run sources by your professor before using them. That's one thing we are here for!