

Tertiary Sources in the Humanities

Tertiary sources condense, summarize, and synthesize many primary and secondary sources.

In the Humanities and Social Sciences

Tertiary sources in the humanities and social sciences are designed to provide background knowledge and contextual information about a topic for general audiences or practitioners or professionals who will apply scholarly knowledge. They provide definitions for specialized concepts or terminology, highlight citations to sources, and contextualize work within a broader field.

Classic Examples

- Textbooks
- Encyclopedias and fact books
- Bibliographies, collections of abstracts, or indexes used to identify secondary or primary sources
- Literature review articles, like survey articles and systematic reviews in STEM-H fields, that synthesize many secondary sources

Identification in Context

Sources that are secondary or tertiary in one context might be primary sources in another.

For instance, if your research design called for a content analysis of the coverage of gender roles in high school health textbooks, then these textbooks would be your primary, rather than tertiary, sources.

Likewise, if your research question was “How did 19th century newspapers in the American Northeast address the publication of Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*?” then book reviews from that era might be one type of primary source you would want to consult, rather than a secondary source.

Where can I find tertiary sources?

Many textbooks, manuals, and reference materials are available through the Mason Libraries and reference databases (*Gale Virtual Reference Library*, *Oxford Reference*, etc.). Literature review articles, survey articles, and systematic reviews can be found in many of Mason’s general and subject-specific databases.