Primary vs. Secondary Sources

Primary Sources:
Documents or pieces of evidence, written at the time of the event, as it was first described, without any interpretation or commentary. They may also be sets of data (scientific or census) that have been tabulated, but not interpreted. These materials come directly from the source.

Examples:
- Treaties, case studies, scientific research
- Diaries, speeches, letters, drawings, interviews
- Creative works: poetry, drama, music, art, films
- Relics or artifacts: jewelry, pottery, furniture, closing

These sources reflect the bias of the writer and what the writer chose to record. The information may not be accurate and well-reasoned. The reader must think critically about what has been documented and evaluate the data if necessary.

Secondary Sources:
Documents which interpret, discuss, and analyze primary sources. These materials are a step or more removed from the actual event. This information is indirect, perhaps coming from other secondary sources as well as the primary source. The data must be examined critically to determine the writer’s expertise, bias, and motivation.

Examples:
- A journal article discussing a scientific study
- A book about Elizabeth Barrett Browning
- A critique on a specific artistic performance
- A magazine article about life in Pompeii before 79 A.D.

Just because a source is in the Library or accessed via the Library home page (subscription database or Internet), does not mean it is credible or appropriate. Evaluate your sources critically, weighing their content and purpose against the purpose of your research project. When in doubt, seek assistance from a Reference Librarian and your professor.

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