3.11: Primary and Secondary Sources

Scholarly sources can be classified into primary sources and secondary sources. See Table 3.4.

In nursing, primary sources are typically used because they are a direct source as opposed to what might be referred to as second-hand information (secondary source). In scholarly writing, it is usually best to go to a direct source. Thus, if you are reading a secondary source that refers to another author reporting something really important, it is best to search out the primary source. However, some secondary sources are appropriate in scholarly writing. For example, when you are trying to get an overall sense of a topic, you might find it helpful to read a secondary source such as a literature review. Secondary sources can also help you understand current statistics or standards of practice.

Table 3.4: Primary and secondary sources

<table>
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<th>Sources</th>
<th>Examples</th>
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Primary sources are direct, firsthand sources of information or data. In nursing, primary sources are typically research articles. Research articles (direct, firsthand sources)

Literary texts

Historical documents such as diaries or letters

Autobiographies or other personal accounts

Secondary sources are one step removed from the primary source of information and discuss, interpret, analyze, consolidate, or otherwise rework information from primary sources. In nursing, common secondary sources include literature reviews

Magazine articles

Biographical books

Literature reviews (e.g., scoping reviews, systematic reviews)

Encyclopedias

Television documentaries

Textbooks

Now, let’s say you are reading a journal article that you have identified as a primary source because it is presenting the findings from a research study about the impact of music to relieve pain. Within that article, you see that the author has cited another author’s work referring to other modalities to relieve pain, such as meditation. If you decide to incorporate the other author’s work about relieving pain through meditation, that is considered a secondary source, even though the article that you are reading is a primary source. You would be better off locating the source that is cited so you can access the original article.

Whether primary and/or secondary sources are appropriate, remember to use them purposefully to support your writing and provide a rich and contextualized argument to your writing.

Student Tip

What type of source is acceptable?

Always consult the assignment guidelines when determining what type of source is acceptable and useful in your writing. Most times, your instructor will specifically ask for peer-reviewed and primary sources. Occasionally, your instructor may allow secondary sources and other scholarly sources, but popular sources are rarely permitted in
scholarly writing.

Activities: Check Your Understanding

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