TYPES OF SOURCES: Primary, Secondary, Scholarly, Popular

Primary
A primary source is a document or physical object that was written or created during the time one is studying. Primary sources were present during the time period or experience. Many primary sources can be found in the archive at NMU! Some primary sources are:

- Original documents such as diaries, manuscripts, speeches, letters, interviews, autobiographies and official records.
- Creative work such as poetry, drama, novels, music, and art.
- Artifacts like pottery, furniture, buildings

Secondary
A secondary source is something that interprets and analyzes primary sources. It is a secondhand account of what a different writer has experienced. These sources are removed from the event. Some secondary sources are:

- Publications such as textbooks, scholastic articles, encyclopedias
- A work that remarks on an event years after the actual event occurred

Depending on the essay being written, both primary sources and secondary sources may be acceptable types of sources. For instance, if a writer is writing an argument essay about the need to pass a certain amendment, she can quote or paraphrase both the amendment itself (the primary source) and the opinions or studies of others that analyze the effectiveness of the amendment (secondary source).

Finding Primary Sources:
Even though secondary sources are often acceptable, primary sources are often better than secondary sources, and there are times when primary sources must be used. While most of the sources that are found during research are secondary sources, it is often possible to also track down the primary source. To do this, look at the references, works cited, bibliography, or internet links (for an internet source) provided in a secondary source. These will often lead you to the primary source itself; after all, these writers have to document their sources just as you have to.

Scholarly and Popular Sources
A scholarly publication is one in which the content is written by experts in a particular field of study - generally for the purpose of sharing original research or analyzing others’ findings. Scholarly work will thoroughly cite all source materials used and is usually subject to “peer review” prior to publication. This means that independent experts in the field review, or “referee” the publication to check the accuracy and validity of its claims. The primary audience for this sort of work is fellow experts and students studying the field. As a result the content is typically much more sophisticated and advanced than articles found in general magazines, or professional/trade journals.

In brief, scholarly work is:

- written by experts for experts
- based on original research or intellectual inquiry
- provides citations for all sources used
- is usually peer reviewed prior to publication

To see the typical components of a scholarly journal article check out the Anatomy of a Scholarly Article from North Carolina State University Libraries.

Popular Sources
A While many of your research projects will require you to read articles published in scholarly journals, books or other peer reviewed source of information, there is also a wealth of information to be found in more popular publications. These aim to inform a wide array of readers about issues of interest and are much more informal in
tone and scope. Examples include general news, business and entertainment publications such as *Time Magazine*, *Business Weekly*, *Vanity Fair*.

- Note, special interest publications which are not specifically written for an academic audience are also considered "popular" i.e., *National Geographic*, *Scientific American*, *Psychology Today*.

**Professional/Trade Sources**

These are more specialized in nature than popular publications, but are not intended to be scholarly. These types of publications are aimed at experts in the field and/or keen amateurs, but the content focuses on news, trends in the field, promotional material etc. Research findings are not typically disseminated here - though they may report that a scholarly publication is forthcoming. These types of publications typically will contain more advertising than a scholarly journal - though it's usually targeted to the field in some way. Examples: *Publishers Weekly*, *Variety*, *Education Digest*.

**Caution**

Some publications have many characteristics of a scholarly work but are not typically peer-reviewed. These can be valuable sources for your research but note - the extent to which a particular work would benefit (i.e., be more accurate, valid, balanced, useful etc.) from formal scrutiny is not always clear to a non-expert. For this reason you should be cautious about using a majority of non-refereed sources for your research.

- **Government documents**: A vast array of publications are produced by government bodies.
  - Some of these - particularly technical data, departmental/agency research reports, scientific assessment reports, statistics etc. - while not peer-reviewed - are produced by subject experts and have most of the characteristics of a scholarly publication.
  - Other government publications, such as consumer fact sheets, MP briefing notes, white papers, Royal Commission reports, trade/industry publications, etc. are written for a general audience and cannot be considered "scholarly" in nature even if they are useful in terms of providing context or background knowledge on a topic.
  - You will have to assess each government publication you wish to use to ensure that it is appropriate source material for your purposes.

- **Conference proceedings**: Are compilations of papers presented at conferences. These papers are sometimes the base material for future refereed publications, sometimes have already been peer-reviewed and sometimes never appear again after the conference.
  - You will need to check the status of any material you find in a collection of conference proceedings to ensure that it is suitable for your research.
  - Ways to check if such materials are scholarly or not include: consulting the preface to the collection, checking the conference website, contacting the presenter directly or asking your instructor for advice.

- **Theses & Dissertations**: While subject to rigorous review, theses and dissertations are not universally considered to have been peer-reviewed. Check with your instructor to determine if these are acceptable sources for your research.

- **Books from academic/university presses**: If a book's editorial board is not comprised of subject experts it cannot be considered peer-reviewed, yet it may still be a very useful source. Ask yourself: is the author an expert in the field? Does the book have all the other criteria of a scholarly publication besides being peer-reviewed? If yes to both - the book will likely be a useful addition to your collection of (mostly refereed) research sources.
What is the purpose of a scholarly source?

What is the purpose of a popular source?

Why do Professional/Trade Sources seem ambiguous?

What are the benefits and negatives of using government documents?

What is problematic about using a Thesis or Dissertation?