

Primary and Secondary Sources

Primary Sources

A primary source contains original information that is not derived from interpretation, summarising, or analysing someone else's work.

For example:

- If you were studying a historical period, such things as diaries, letters and official records would be primary sources. Any works that make use of these would be secondary.
- If you were studying an educational theorist, the books written by them that discuss their theories are primary. Any sources that introduce, interpret, or critique their theories are secondary.
- Research that makes use of data collected by the author(s) is primary whereas research that relies on the findings of others is secondary.

Be aware that what constitutes a primary source is often relative to the topic at hand. For example, Maurice Shadbolt's 'The New Zealand Wars' novels would be primary sources with regards to the author but could be considered secondary sources with regards to the accounts of historical figures, such as Te Kooti and Titokowaru, that he draws on.

Secondary Sources

Secondary sources are work that has been based on primary (or other secondary) sources. They are usually an interpretation, a summary, an analysis, or a review.

For example:

- A biography of a famous person or a documentary about a historic event.
- A book that provides an introduction to a theorist's work, critiques it, or applies their theories in a particular context.
- An article that reviews research in a particular area and provides a summary of the key findings.

It's possible for secondary sources to also contain primary source material. For example, a biography would be secondary but could contain previously unpublished primary material such as diary entries or excerpts from an interview.

How to Decide

When deciding if a source is primary or secondary try to determine where the authors get their information from: Is it coming from their own experience, thoughts, collection of data, or are they basing it on other sources?

If you are looking at research articles, the author(s) should include how they obtained their data. Often this will be clearly stated under a 'methodology' heading. If it is primary research they will state the research methods they used and the subjects they collected data from. If it is not primary research, it is likely to state what literature the author(s) have looked at and discuss the findings of previous studies.

Some databases have options to make this task easier for you.

- **CINAHL** has a limiter for 'research article.' Selecting this will restrict your results to articles containing original research. While this will filter out a lot of material that is not primary research, you still need to check the methodology used to ensure that it is indeed primary research.
- **Science Direct** will usually display 'original research article' next to primary sources. However, it will not do this for all primary research, so it still pays to check.

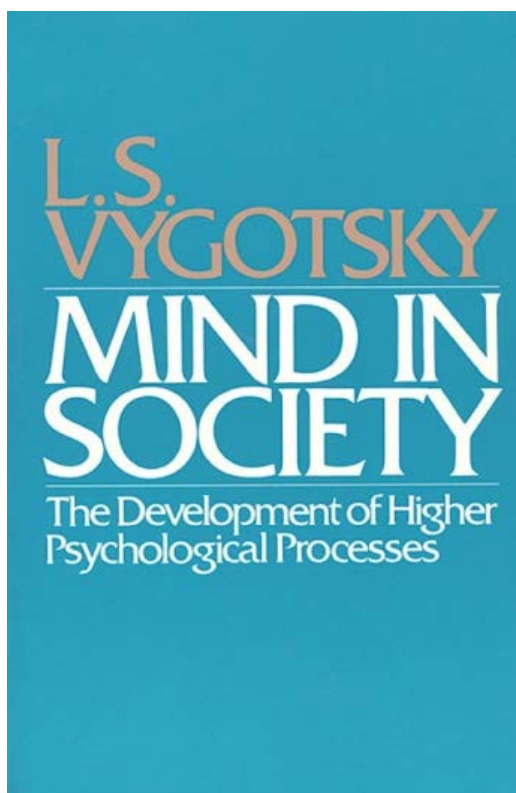


Figure 1. Mind in society (from Vygotsky, 1978)

Mind in Society is a primary text written by Vygotsky

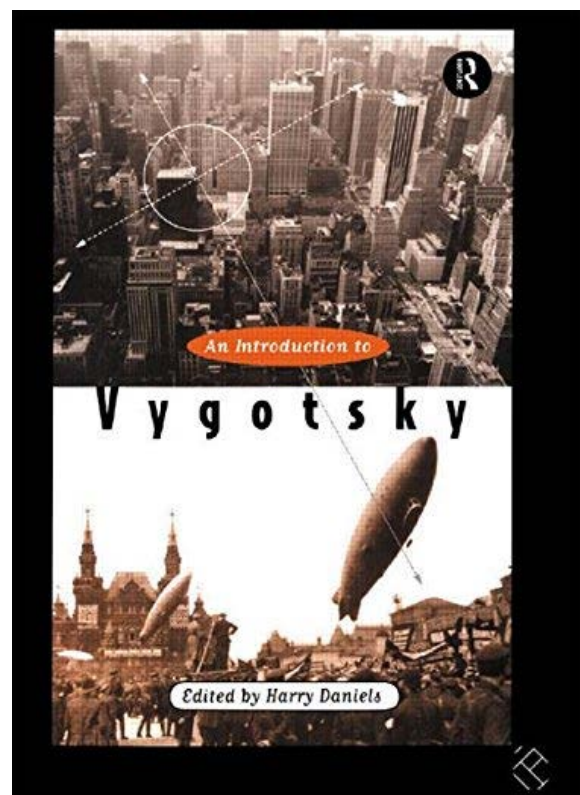


Figure 2. Introduction to Vygotsky (from Daniels, 1996)

An Introduction to Vygotsky contains texts based on Vygotsky's work and is therefore a secondary source.

Examples

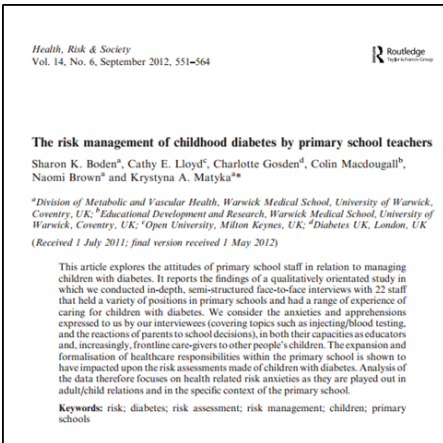


Figure 3. Risk management of childhood diabetes (from Boden et al, 2012)

The abstract of this research article describes how the authors collected data by interviewing teachers. Their methodology makes it primary research.

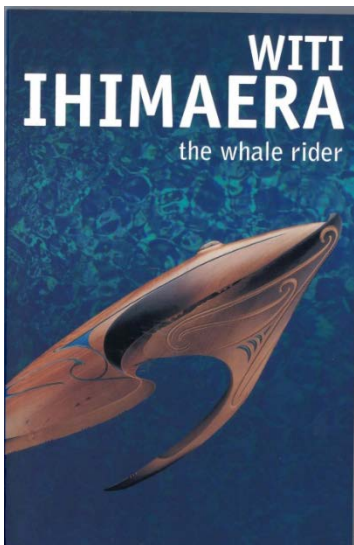


Figure 5. Whale rider (from Ihimaera, 2008)

This is a primary source with regards to Witi Ihimaera

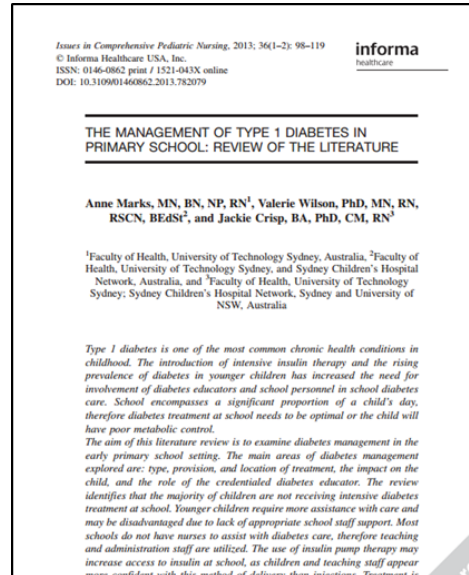


Figure 4. Management of type 1 diabetes (from Marks, Wilson & Crisp, 2013).

Having ‘review of the literature’ in the title is a giveaway that this is a secondary source. Even without this, the abstract makes it clear that the article relies on previously published primary research, making this article a secondary resource.



Figure 6. Politics of location (from Message, 2003)

Kylie Message’s article examines The Whale Rider in relation to location and landscapes, so it is a secondary resource.

References

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