

PRIMARY SOURCES

Using primary sources in your writing can be an excellent way to break the monotony of simply reporting information from secondary sources. Usually, when you are an undergraduate student, you are allowed to undertake some very basic and very general forms of primary research. Oftentimes, this research is more or less journalistic in nature rather than working towards proving concepts scientifically. Therefore, you have a few possibilities in how you approach and use primary research.

Unlike secondary sources which focus on borrowing ideas from others (such as using books and articles to find quoted material), primary research allows you to investigate issues on your own.

We tend to refer to primary research as more “hands on” research, since primary research normally includes a few tasks which go “above and beyond” the idea of simply searching online for resources or search the library for paper materials.

In primary research, you can do a few different things to add more depth to your paper:
You can conduct interviews.
You can conduct surveys.
You can even conduct observations of a particular places/things related to your paper.

EX:

Here's how it works... Let's say that I want to know more about computer gaming. I have two choices: I can read some books about computer gaming, or I can ask someone about computer gaming (perhaps someone who plays games regularly on the computer).

Both forms of information are reasonable, since I will learn about gaming either from the book or from a real person.

However, one is generally safer than the other and somewhat less time consuming. For example, if you ask a gamer the wrong question, you could find yourself in a contentious position with an angry person.

But, if you read a book, you do not find yourself in such perilous circumstances. And, again, taking time to read a book takes less time than setting up a meeting with someone to ask questions of them. On the other hand, some people learn much better from direct experiences from sources rather than reading books. If you find yourself more inclined to learn from others, than doing primary research might be more interesting for you.

LIMITATIONS

In a collegiate environment, the university usually has rules in regards to the extent in which a student can do primary research. For example, if you are experimenting with humans, then the answer is “No Way!” (You must obtain formal permission from the college/university in order to do any specific work with human beings). If you are experimenting with animals, then the answer is “No Way!” (Again, you must obtain formal research to do any work with animals). If you are interview people and asking them very personal questions, then the answer is “No

Way!" (Asking deeply personal questions is not something appropriate for informal research). Furthermore, if you were asking people how often they had sex (because the subject matter is deeply personal and may embarrass a person openly), the answer would again be "No Way!" (Your instructor would never approve of you asking such particular questions which might cause distress or embarrassment to a person). Furthermore, you cannot study humans relationships or even human nature. You cannot study how X or Y affect humans.

However, if you take a more journalistic approach to your subject matter (that is, being an observer informally and reporting what anyone else could ascertain from just asking a person "on the street"), then you put yourself in a better position to conduct research. More specifically, if you ask people about their personal opinion about popular topics then you are fine. Moreover, if you ask a person why they believe as they do (about a topic), then you are fine, since these are the types of questions asked by reporters/journalists under normal circumstances.

Examples of Safe Interview Topics (Recommended for Primary Source Use):

Political Opinion (e.g. Do you like our president? Is he doing a good job?)
Public Opinion (e.g. How do you feel about this/that law?)
Gaming (e.g. How long have you been playing games?)
Hydrogen Fuel Cells (e.g. How much gas do you buy per week?)
Public Transportation (e.g. Would you ride a train to work everyday?)
Migrant Workers (e.g. Do immigrant workers need health insurance?)

Questions related to these topics are not offensive and would not necessarily cause a person to become uncontrollably emotionally upset.

Examples of Unsafe Interview Topics (Not Recommended for Primary Source Use):

Political Preference (e.g. Are you a Democrat or Republican?)
Sexual Preference (e.g. Are you straight or gay?)
Gender (e.g. Are all women promiscuous?)
Sex (e.g. Have you had sex recently?)
Race/Nationality (e.g. What is your race?)
Religion/Creed (e.g. What is your religion?)
Child Abuse (e.g. Were you abused as a child?)
Age (e.g. What is your age?)
Abortion (e.g. What was it liked to have a baby aborted?)
Rape (e.g. Tell me about your rape?)
Genocide (e.g. How many brothers or sisters did you lose?)
Holocaust Matters (e.g. Did they kill your entire family?)

Questions such as these are not appropriate and would cause a person to potentially become uncontrollably upset, causing potential emotional harm. Therefore, these topics and the questions are not suitable for informal work.

FORMAL VERSUS INFORMAL RESEARCH

Again, the distinction is FORMALITY.

Formal research is generally more prepared and much more likely to harm a person (physically, emotionally, spiritually, socially, or other). Generally, informal research is limited to asking

people's opinions on topics and gathering insight into their personal dispositions about certain ideas. Do you like a particular type of music or a particular film, and why? You might even ask a person how they feel about the state of the government, since most of these questions can be asked of anyone.

In sum, if you remove yourself from harm or harming another person, then you move closer to informal research, which is much more appropriate for the undergraduate level.

Additionally, in using primary sources, you must abide by a particular code of ethics:

+You must not use the information to publicly humiliate anyone. That is, you must not be slanderous or commit libel (tarnish a person's image publicly). You could be personally liable for any damage done to that person (in other words, you could be sued in court, and you don't want that).

+You cannot put anyone (including yourself) into any form of harm (including making an interviewee extremely sad or angry). Again, you could be personally liable for any damage done to that person (again, you could be sued in court).

+You cannot take anything from a research site (a place you are studying) without the express permission of the people around you. Theft is a crime.

+You must discuss how your research was obtained specifically in your paper (that is, disclose the research method, the questions asked in the interview, and/or the questions asked on the survey – you might provide these materials as an addendum or appendix to your paper). If you do not disclose how you obtained the information, your instructor might suppose that you were making up material on your paper or creating information or forging information which is considered academic dishonesty, and you could fail an assignment (or worse, you could fail the course).

Failing to adhere to such ethics may be unfavorably viewed by your instructor and to the legal community (there could be legal ramifications), so be careful.