Understanding Primary and Secondary sources

Within academia a distinction is made between primary and secondary sources because the same source material can be used in multiple ways. Thus, depending on how it is used, the source material is classified as either a primary or secondary source. As for what can be used as source material: simply put, everything. Everything is a potential source material. Whether it's a pop song, a corporate social service report, or the bedtime stories that your grandmother tells, everything can be used as source material. And, this is why the distinction between a primary source and secondary source is important.

A primary source is basically the raw material you work with. For example, if you are studying the poems by the 21st century British poet, Warsan Shire, then the poems themselves are your primary texts because they are your object of analysis. Your secondary texts will be scholarship by art critics and/or other literary theorists who have already studied Shire's poems.

Remember, though, that source material cannot be simultaneously used as primary and secondary material. For example, if you are writing a paper on Pakistan's national identity, the national anthem will be one of the key sources that you will use for your paper. Now, if you write an analysis of the national anthem, which means that you will be going over the anthem line by line to make an argument, then you will be using it as a primary source. On the other hand, if you only mention that the national anthem is a rich source for exploring the construction of Pakistan's national identity, without doing any actual exploration, then you are using the national anthem as a secondary source because no analysis of the anthem is taking place.

Additionally, multiple primary sources can be included within one paper as well. For example, in addition to Pakistan's national anthem, you may also analyze Jinnah's 1948 speech and the 1956 constitution of Pakistan for evidence in support of your argument about Pakistan's national identity. Thus, it is by analyzing these three sources (the national anthem, Jinnah's speech, and the 1956 constitution) that you will be using them as your primary sources. As for your secondary sources, you can use multiple articles and books written by Pakistani historians such as Ayesha Jalal, Akbar Zaidi, and Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali Zamindar to provide more context and make an appeal to authority to further support your analysis of the primary sources.

Let's take a look at another example. If you are analyzing the Turing Machine, which is a mathematical concept developed by Alan Turing, then your primary source is the model that Turing made. Your secondary texts in this case would be what scholars have already written about the Turing Machine.

Lastly, the paper that you write, itself, can be used as either a primary or secondary source by other researchers. Let's say, hypothetically speaking, that after writing your paper on Pakistan's self-image, you submitted it to *Pakistan Horizon*, a journal by Pakistan Institute of International Affairs, from where it can be downloaded by other researchers. Now, if any one of the researchers cites your paper to support or dispute theirs or others' claims about Pakistan's national identity, then your paper is being used as a secondary source (remember, the role of a secondary source is to provide support). However, if a researcher decided to analyze your paper, then your paper becomes a primary source for that particular researcher.

Also, please note that what gets to be counted as a primary or secondary source largely depends on which academic discipline you are located in. For example, within Political Science, newspapers are a valuable primary source, whereas in Literary Studies newspapers are usually pegged as secondary sources. If you are unsure whether a particular text should be your primary or secondary source, then ask your instructor.