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# My Learning Essentials



Know your sources:  
Types of information

CHEAT SHEET



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# Introduction: what's out there?

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There are dozens of different types of sources that you can use in your research.

As well as the obvious ones...

BOOKS



JOURNAL  
ARTICLES



WEBSITES



...there are all of these...

**reports**

**conference  
proceedings**

**encyclopedias**

**blogs**

**archives**

**statistics**

**patents**

# What's out there?

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## *Reports*

Reports can take different forms depending on the discipline.

Those used in business and management will provide information about markets, industries or companies, and they can be useful as evidence for justifying decisions in policy and business. These will usually contain statistical data along with some interpretation.

## *Conference proceedings*

Proceedings are collections of papers that have been presented at a conference, usually in science and engineering disciplines.

They can be difficult to find as they are often published erratically, though fields such as computer science do publish their proceedings regularly.

The content of these papers is usually cutting-edge research, so they're a great source of up-to-date information.

# What's out there?

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## *Encyclopedias*

Encyclopedias are collections of information. They can cover either a broad range of subjects, like the Encyclopedia Britannica, or a specific subject area such as Black's Medical Dictionary.

Encyclopedias can be useful for familiarising yourself with terminology, as well as getting a broad understanding of a topic before carrying out more detailed research elsewhere.

## *Blogs*

Blogs are a type of website that are used to communicate ideas, opinions or information on a regular basis. They can be published by individuals, groups, companies or organisations.

You might refer to blog posts in an assignment to illustrate different points of view, or if you're looking for up-to-date reaction and analysis to recent events.

Researchers often keep blogs about their research, so they can be a good source of information about the latest developments in your field.

# What's out there?

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## *Archives*

Archives are collections of historical documents or records. They can reveal information about places, institutions, individuals or groups of people. You might use an archive of letters in an assignment about the life of a particular author, or use company archives for an assignment on the history of an organisation.

## *Statistics*

You can find statistics relating to almost all areas of life, including business, healthcare, transport, economics, politics and education. Statistics can be published as standalone data, or as part of a wider report.

Referring to relevant statistics in your assignments can often add weight to your argument.

# What's out there?

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## *Patents*

A patent is a licence granted to an individual or organisation to affirm their sole right to making, using or selling an invention.

They can provide technical and scientific information about products that may not be available from any other source.

# Three ways to classify information

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There are three key characteristics of information that you should be aware of when looking for sources to use in your academic work:

## *TIMELINESS*

How long after the original event was the information published?

## *PRIMARY, SECONDARY OR TERTIERY*

Does the information come from the original source, or has it been interpreted in some way?

## *POPULAR VS. SCHOLARLY*

Is the information from an academic source that has been through a quality assurance process?

In this resource we'll explore these in a little more detail.

# Timeliness: overview

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The **timeliness** of an information source not only refers to how recent it is, but also **how much time has passed** between the original event and the publication of the source.

How much this matters will depend on your purpose. If your assignment title is..

“ *EVALUATE DESCARTES' ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT  
FOR THE EXISTENCE OF GOD* ”

...then the timeliness of your sources will not be important.

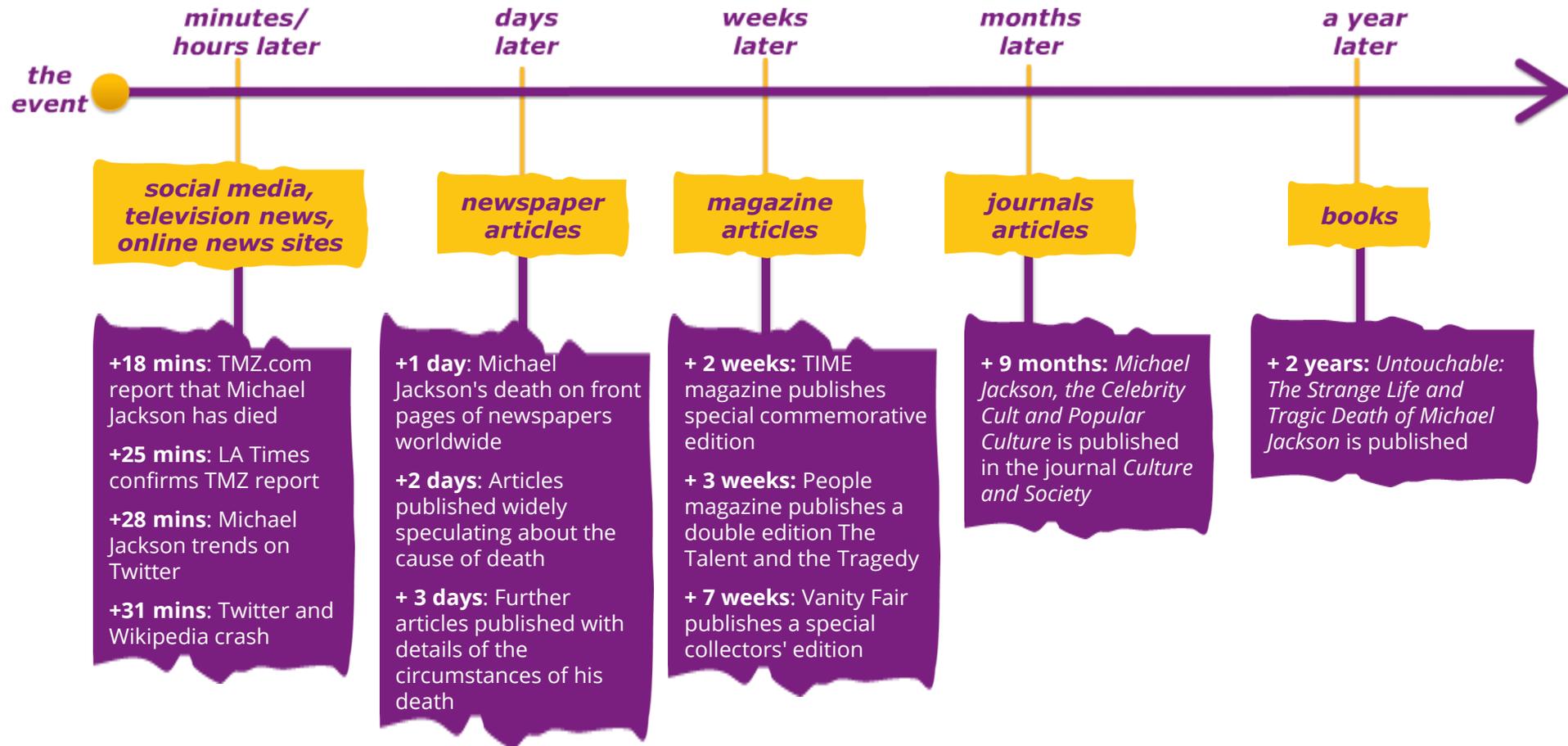
However, a chapter from a book published in 1993 about the 1990 Poll Tax Riots is probably of little use for the assignment title...

“ *ASSESS THE IMPACT OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON RECENT  
OUTBREAKS OF CIVIL UNREST.* ”

This will influence where you look for information.

# Timeliness: example

Let's look at an example of an information timeline. This example uses Michael Jackson's death as the original event.



# Primary secondary or tertiary? Overview

The distinctions between primary, secondary and tertiary sources refers to how far removed the source is from the subject of study. The **proximity** of the source can help to indicate how original the information is likely to be; this may influence what type of sources you look for in your research. This diagram illustrates the concept of **proximity**.

A **PRIMARY** source is information collected first hand. It is original data that has not been filtered, interpreted or evaluated.

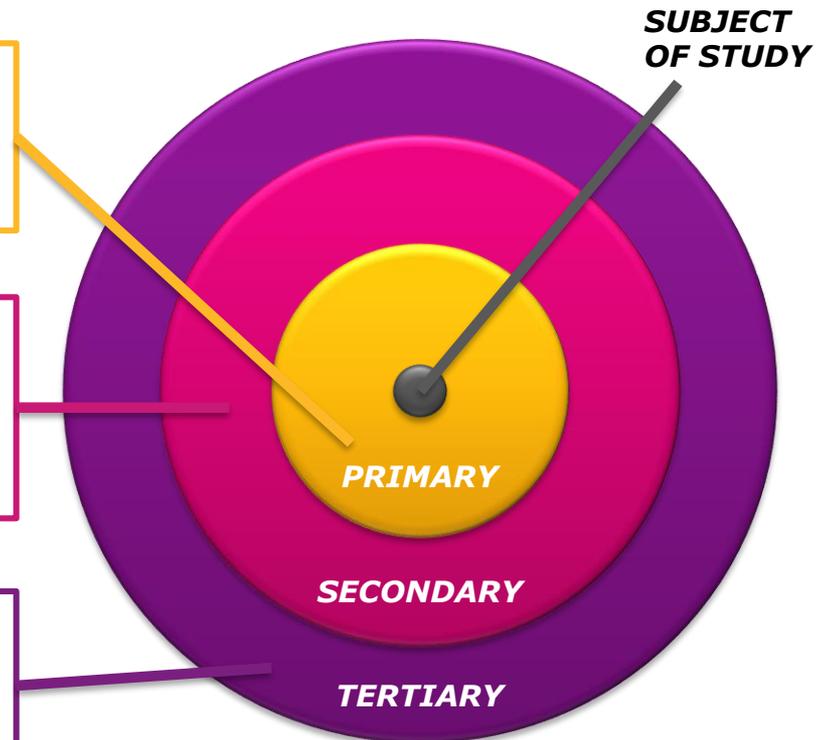
Examples include interviews, statistics, survey results, patents, financial records, and works of art.

A **SECONDARY** source is an analysis, interpretation or commentary on existing information, including primary and/or other secondary sources.

A lot of the work that you produce during your time as a student will be secondary.

**TERTIARY** sources are summaries or collections of primary and/or secondary sources.

Examples of tertiary sources include dictionaries, encyclopedias, bibliographies and directories.



# Primary secondary or tertiary? Examples

The lines between these types of source can be blurred; some sources may be considered to be more than one of the three types. In this example, our subject of study is the 1987 release of Michael Jackson's *Bad* album.

***Michael Jackson's Bad album (1987)***  
***Sheet music for the song Smooth Criminal***  
***Interview with Quincy Jones about the production of Bad (conducted in 2012)***

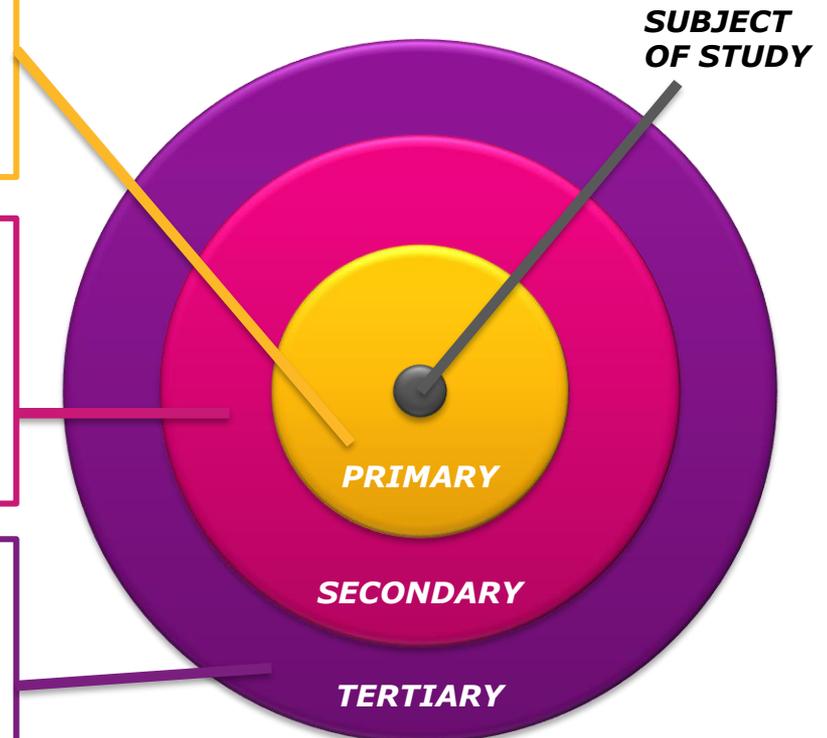
These are all examples of primary sources that are original, unaltered, first-hand information.

***Spike Lee's Bad 25 documentary (released 2012)***  
While the documentary as a whole is a secondary source, it features some archive footage which could be considered as primary.  
***New York Times review of Bad (published 1987)***  
***Variety review of Moonwalker (published 1987)***

These are all examples of secondary sources that analyse, review or interpret other sources.

***Michael Jackson singles discography (Wikipedia)***  
***Official chart listings for Michael Jackson***  
***IMDB listing for Moonwalker (1988)***  
While the listing itself is an example of a tertiary source, any reviews that are included would be classified as secondary sources.

These are all examples of tertiary sources that index, summarise or categorise information from other sources.



# Popular vs. scholarly: overview

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Identifying whether a source is **popular** or **scholarly** can give an indication of how **authoritative** it is. Scholarly literature is usually written by subject experts and reviewed by other experts in the field before publishing, which provides a degree of quality assurance that you often don't get with popular material.

## POPULAR MATERIAL...

...is often based on opinion rather than evidence

...is not always corroborated

...uses everyday language

...usually deal with broad issues

## SCHOLARLY MATERIAL...

...is evidence-based

...is often peer-reviewed

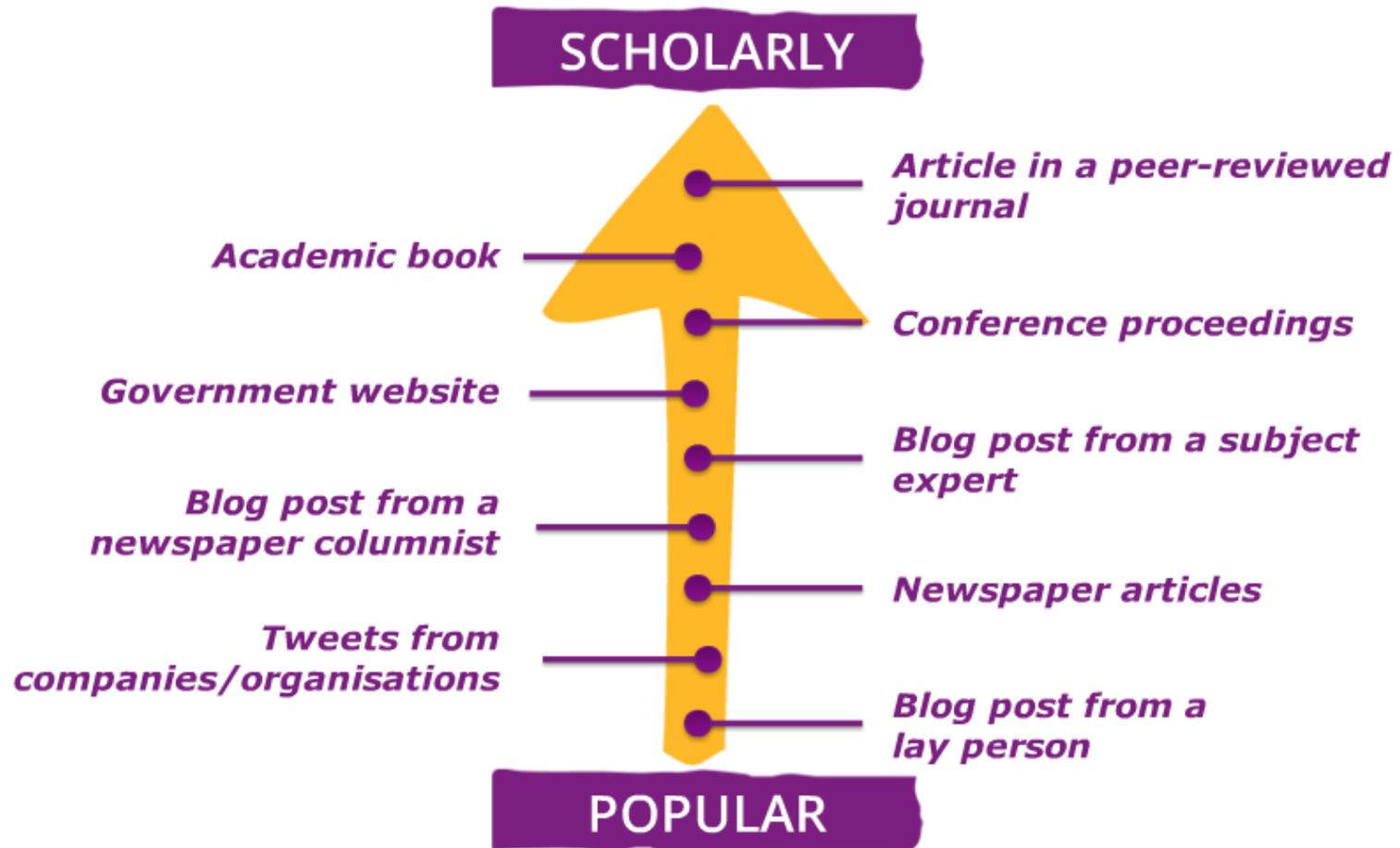
...uses academic language

...usually presents in-depth analysis

It is important to bear this distinction in mind; it will help you to evaluate the information sources you find. Sometimes it will be appropriate to refer to popular material, but in general most disciplines will expect you to cite scholarly literature.

# Popular vs. scholarly: example

This diagram illustrates the concept of **authority**, placing a number of sources on the spectrum from **popular** to **scholarly**.



# Summary: know your sources

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We've examined three key characteristics which you must take into account when evaluating different types of information.

## *TIMELINESS*

How long after the original event was the information published?

## *PRIMARY, SECONDARY OR TERTIERY*

Does the information come from the original source, or has it been interpreted in some way?

## *POPULAR VS. SCHOLARLY*

Is the information from an academic source that has been through a quality assurance process?

You should now be aware of what sources are available for you to use in your work, and what their main characteristics are.

This will help you to make an informed decision about the types of sources you use in your academic work.

