

Primary and Secondary Sources in Law

Oesterle Library Information Literacy & Instruction Program

Primary Source: A Definition

A statement of the law itself from a governmental entity, such as a court, legislature, executive agency, President or Governor.

Source: Georgetown University Law Library Legal Research Definitions,
http://www.ll.georgetown.edu/tutorials/definitions/primary_source.html

Examples of primary sources in law:

- court decisions
- statutes
- Federal Register
- U.S. Code
- Code of Federal Regulations
- text of legislative bills
- contracts, wills, and other legal documents

Secondary Source: A Definition

Materials that discuss, explain, interpret, and analyze what the law is or what it should be, including treatises, law reviews, encyclopedias, ALR annotations, Restatements, and legal newspapers. Secondary sources also provide extensive citations to primary legal materials and other relevant secondary sources.

Source: Georgetown University Law Library Legal Research Definitions,
http://www.ll.georgetown.edu/tutorials/definitions/secondary_source.html

Examples of secondary sources in law:

- Law reviews
- Legal news
- Law reference books (encyclopedias, dictionaries, etc)
- Articles about law
- Books about law