The information cycle is the life a work takes on after it is published. Upon publication, the creative process leading to the creation of the primary source — the novel or poem or literary work itself — is complete, but its life in the cultural sphere into which it is introduced is just beginning. Knowing the basic trajectory of a work’s reception will help you understand the context and evaluate the quality of the secondary sources. For literature, secondary sources are all the other things that get written about the primary source. This includes reviews, commentary, literary criticism (which may come in the form of scholarly journal articles, books, book chapters, or a scholar’s website), reference works, and more.

Here is a very simple breakdown of the information cycle for a literary work. Keep this in mind when you are searching for your secondary sources. When you find a source and go to annotate it for your bibliography, ask yourself about where it falls on this timeline.

**Publication => Reviews and Commentary => Literary Criticism => Canonization.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Publication</th>
<th>Reviews</th>
<th>Lit Criticism</th>
<th>Canon</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Primary source begins the info cycle</td>
<td>Begin to appear within weeks to months</td>
<td>Begin to appear within several months or years and continue indefinitely</td>
<td>Usually not established for many years or decades</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Examples | Novels, poems, short stories, plays, films | New York Times Reviews, various popular newspaper and magazines. Online sources: amazon reviews, blogs, publisher sites, and so on | Scholarly journal articles, books, book chapters. | Reference works such as literary encyclopedias and dictionaries. |

| Where to find | Book catalog such as Piper or Worldcat | Newspapers and magazines; databases such as JSTOR, LRC, Academic Search Premier; online for popular reviews | Scholarly journals; databases such as LRC, JSTOR, LION; some online presence. | Reference databases including LRC, Gale Virtual Reference; general online sources |

Philip Smith  
LMU-CV Library  
2010
Information Cycle for Literary Works

You can think of this information cycle kind of like a piece of news or tragic event, as in [this video](#). Something happens, an author writes a book. Then people react to it. These first reactions usually come in the form of reviews and commentary. This generally starts happening right after something is published and may continue for many weeks or months. This is like critics or movie buffs writing or talking about a new movie that’s just come out. Although they may give some analysis of the story or characters and the movie’s influences, they’re basically just telling you whether they liked it or not and whether it is worth your time. Depending on the work in question and how “highbrow” it may be, these are generally more popular and aimed at the general reader. Back in the day, reviews came out mostly in newspapers and magazines and sometimes scholarly journals would (and still do) have a section of each issue devoted to reviews of new works. Nowadays you can get reviews and commentary all over the web in addition to these traditional sources. For example, when I was looking up information on Joyce’s story “The Dead”, I came across the Amazon.com page for *Dubliners* (the book in which the story is published) which has literally hundreds of reviews. I also stumbled upon a discussion group for the story on goodreads.com. These are both fun and good sites, but not exactly the kind of scholarly stuff I’m looking for as sources for my paper. I may be able to read through some of these for ideas or suggestions for more scholarly sources, but I wouldn’t want to use them as sources themselves.

Reviews can be more scholarly as well. When you search a database like JSTOR you will probably see lots of reviews. These may be reviews for the story itself, or reviews of other secondary works on Joyce or *Dubliners*. Again, good stuff in its own rights, but generally not what you’re looking for here.

Next comes literary criticism. This generally starts appearing only after a couple of years from when the work is first published. This is definitely more scholarly in tone and content and usually deals with the subject in a richer, more thorough way than reviews and commentary. Such an article may focus on just one theme or aspect of the work, or discuss it in relation to other works or to historical trends in general. You’ll see a lot of literary criticism in the databases I’ve shown you (LRC and JSTOR especially). Quite often it is published in scholarly journals and indexed in these databases, but literary criticism may also come in the form of books or book chapters. Also these days literary scholars may make some of their articles available for free online. Be careful though! Sometimes students (lowly undergrads like yourselves) will proudly self-publish their essays from their literature classes. This is cool and everything, but again you generally want to avoid this for your paper.

Somewhere along the line in all this flurry of secondary sources, amongst the clouds of commentary, debate, and criticism about a work or author a transformation occurs. The work goes from being something some guy or gal just wrote to being an important piece of Literature and a hallmark of that culture’s overall artistic achievements. When this happens we say the work has entered the *canon*. Many authors and works in the Western canon are household names: Shakespeare, Faulkner, *Paradise Lost*, the Bible. But there are many other authors and works of canon status you may not have heard of. A pretty good way to know something is in the canon is if it has a lot of secondary sources published
Information Cycle for Literary Works

around it. Another indication is if it shows up in reference works such as you see in a database like LRC. We’ve talked a little bit about reference works such dictionaries and encyclopedias and biographies, which can be general (Britannica, Wikipedia) or subject specific (various literary encyclopedias). These are excellent background information sources, but generally you want to stick with actual literary criticism articles or books for your sources.

There can be lots of variations of this. Here is one possible course through the information cycle a work may take. A work may receive critical attention right away or it may languish for years before it is discovered and written about. Most of the texts you’ll be reading in ENG210 are already established in the canon, so you should be able to find secondary sources at all points on this continuum. So again, bottom line, you basically want to avoid reviews, especially popular ones (which are even easier to find these days on the web at sites such as good reads or amazon customer reviews), at least as formal sources for your paper (they may be valuable as basic background information though), and try to find sources that qualify as literary criticism by credible authorities.

The information cycle as presented here focuses on literary works. Other disciplines of study have similar but distinct ways of disseminating their knowledge. As you move into your major (whether you’re a nursing major, education, psychology, pre-med, whatever) you will learn more about the information cycle specific to your discipline. You can find out more here now.