**A Guide for Using Primary Source or Original Source Documents**

**OPVL Origins, Purpose, Values, Limitations**

Origin, Purpose, Value and Limitation (OPVL) is a technique for analyzing historical documents. It is used extensively in the International Baccalaureate curriculum and testing materials, and is incredibly helpful in teaching students to be critical observers. It is also known as Document Based Questions (DBQ).

**ORIGIN:**

In order to analyze a source, you must first know what it is. Sometimes not all of these questions can be answered. The more you do know about where a document is coming from, the easier it is to ascertain purpose, value and limitation.

1. **Primary** – letter, journal, interview, speeches, photos, paintings, etc. Primary sources are created by someone who is the “first person”; these documents can also be called “original source documents.” The author or creator is presenting original materials as a result of discovery or to share new information or opinions. Primary documents have not been filtered through interpretation or evaluation by others. In order to get a complete picture of an event or era, it is necessary to consult multiple—and often contradictory—sources.
2. **Secondary** – materials that are written with the benefit of hindsight and materials that filter primary sources through interpretation or evaluation. Books commenting on a historical incident in history are secondary sources. Political cartoons can be tricky because they can be considered either primary or secondary.
3. **Other questions** must be answered beyond whether the source is primary or secondary and will give you much more information about the document that will help you answer questions in the other categories:
4. Who created it?
5. Who is the author?
6. When was it created?
7. When was it published?
8. Where was it published?
9. Who is publishing it?
10. *Is there anything we know about the author that is pertinent to our evaluation?*

**PURPOSE:**

This is the point where you start the real evaluation of the piece and try to figure out the purpose for its creation. You must be able to think as the author of the document. At this point you are still only focusing on the single piece of work you are evaluating.

1. Why does this document exist?
2. Why did the author create this piece of work?
3. What is the intent?
4. Why did the author choose this particular format?
5. Who is the intended audience?
6. Who was the author thinking would receive this?
7. What does the document “say”?
8. Can it tell you more than is on the surface?

**VALUE:**

Now comes the hard part. Putting on your historian hat, you must determine:

Based on who wrote it, ***when/where (origin)***it came from, ***why (purpose)***it was created, and its historical context, what **value** does this document have as a piece of evidence?

This is where you show your expertise and put the piece in context. Bring in your outside information at this point.

1. What can we tell about the author from the piece?
2. What can we tell about the time period from the piece?
3. Under what circumstances was the piece created and how does the piece reflect those circumstances?
4. What can we tell about any controversies from the piece?
5. Does the author represent a particular ‘side’ of a controversy or event?
6. What can we tell about the author’s perspectives from the piece?
7. What was going on in history at the time the piece was created and how does this piece accurately reflect it?

The following is an example of a student’s value analysis on a primary source:

Journal Entry—July 25, 1945. President H. S. Truman

*We met at 11:00 a.m. today. That is, Stalin, Churchill, and the U.S. president. But I had a most important session with Lord Mountbatten and General Marshall before that. We have discovered the most terrible bomb in the history of the world. It may be the fire destruction prophesied in the Euphrates Valley era, after Noah and his fabulous ark. Anyway we think we have found the way to cause a disintegration of the atom. An experiment in the New Mexican desert was startling - to put it mildly. Thirteen pounds of the explosive caused the complete disintegration of a steel tower sixty feet high, created a crater six feet deep and twelve hundred feet in diameter, knocked over a steel tower a half mile away, and knocked men down ten thousand yards away. The explosion was visible for more than two hundred miles and audible for forty miles and more.*

*This weapon is to be used against Japan between now and August 10. I have told the secretary of war, Mr. Stimson, to use it so that military objectives and soldiers and sailors are the target and not women and children. Even if the Japs are savages, ruthless, merciless and fanatic, we as the leader of the world for the common welfare cannot drop this terrible bomb on the old capital or the new) He and I are in accord. The target will be a purely military one and we will issue a warning statement asking the Japs to surrender and save lives. I'm sure they will not do that, but we will have given them the chance. It is certainly a good thing for the world that Hitler's crowd or Stalin's did not discover this atomic bomb. It seems to be the most terrible thing ever discovered, but it can be made the most useful.*

**Student’s Analysis:**

“The journal entry was written by President Truman prior to the dropping of the atomic bomb on Japan and demonstrates the moral dilemma he was having in making the decision of whether to drop the bomb or not. It shows that he was highly conflicted about the decision and very aware of the potential consequences both for diplomatic/military relations and for the health and welfare of the Japanese citizens.”

**LIMITATION:**

The task here is not to point out weaknesses of the source, but rather to say: at what point does this source cease to be of value to us as historians? With a primary source document, having an incomplete picture of the whole is a given because the source was created by one person (or a small group of people), naturally they will not have given every detail of the context. Do not say that the author left out information unless you have concrete proof (from another source) that they *chose* to leave information out.

Also, it is obvious that the author did not have prior knowledge of events that came after the creation of the document. Do not state that the document “does not explain X” (if X happened later).

1. **Being biased does not limit the value of a source!** If you are going to comment on the bias of a document, you must go into detail. Who is it biased towards? Who is it biased against? What part of a story does it leave out? Sometimes a biased piece of work shows much about the history you are studying
2. What part of the story can we NOT tell from this document?
3. How can we verify the content of the piece?
4. Does this piece inaccurately reflect anything about the time period?
5. What does the author leave out and why does he/she leave it out (if you know)?
6. What is purposely not addressed?

This is again an area for you to show your expertise of the context. You need to briefly explain the parts of the story that the document leaves out. Give examples of other documents that might mirror or answer this document. What parts of the story/context can this document *not* tell?