

A guide for analyzing historical documents OPCVL: Origin, Purpose, Content, Value, Limitation

Origin, Purpose, Content, Value, Limitation (OPCVL) is a technique for analyzing historical documents.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 and analytical thinkers.

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. This is where you would also identify if it is a primary or secondary source.

- Primary Source– letter, journal, interview, speeches, photos, paintings, etc. Primary sources are created by someone who is the “first person.” Primary documents have not been filtered through interpretation or evaluation by others.
- Secondary Source – 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.
- *Note: One is not more reliable than the other. Valuable information can be gleaned from both types of documents. A primary document can tell you about the original author’s perspective; a secondary document can tell you how the primary document was received during a specific time period or by a specific audience.*

- Who is the author?
- When was it created?
- When was it published?
- Where was it published?
- Who is publishing it?
- *Is there anything we know about the author that is pertinent to our evaluation?*
 - This last question is especially important. The more you know about the author of a document, the easier it is to answer the following questions. Knowing that *George* was the author of a document might mean a lot more if you know you are talking about *George Washington* and know that he was the first president, active in the creation of the United States, a General, etc.

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.

- Why does this document exist?
- Why did the author create this piece of work? What is the intent?
- Why did the author choose this particular format?
- Who is the intended audience? Who was the author thinking would receive this?
- Can it tell you more than is on the surface?
 - If you are teaching at the high school level, try to steer students away from saying “I think the document means this...” Obviously, if students are making a statement it is coming from their thinking. Help them practice saying “The document means this...*because it is supported by x evidence.*”

Content:

This component requires a summary of the source in order to demonstrate your ability to understand its meaning. Be careful not to place purpose and content together – they are two unique components! You will use content to help assess the next two points (V & L) – so make sure you understand the document!

- What does the document “say?”
- What is the main idea of the source?
- What arguments, analysis, or conclusion are present within the source’s content?

*****With reference to origin, purpose and content, analyze the values and limitations of the source. *****

Value:

Now comes the hard part. Putting on your historian hat, you must determine: Based on *who* wrote it (origin), *when/where* it came from, *why* it was created (purpose) and *what* the source says (content)...what value does this document have as a piece of information? This is where you show your expertise and put the source in context. Bring in your outside information here.

- What can we tell about the author and/or time period from the piece?
- Under what circumstances was the piece created and how does the piece reflect those circumstances?
- What can we tell about any controversies from the piece?
- What can we tell about the author’s perspectives from the piece?
- What was going on in history at the time the piece was created and how does this piece accurately reflect it? (Put the document in historical context!)
 - It helps if you know the context of the document and can explain what the document helps you to understand about the context.
 - The following is an example of value 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 and 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).

- What part of the story can we NOT tell from this document?
- Does the author represent a particular ‘side’ of a controversy or event?
- Does this piece inaccurately reflect anything about the time period?
- What does the author leave out and why does he/she leave it out (if you know)?
- What is purposely not addressed?
 - Being biased does not necessarily 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? What part of the story is MISSING because of parts left out?
 - 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. What parts of the story/context can this document *not* tell?