

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Origin, Purpose, Value and Limitation (OPVL) is a technique for analyzing historical documents.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).

OPVL can be adapted to be used in any grade. Younger students can answer more concrete, factual questions about a document, while older students have more capacity for abstract reasoning, placing documents in historical context, and drawing conclusions.

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. *The definition of primary and secondary source materials can be problematic. There is constant debate among academic circles on how to definitively categorize certain documents and there is no clear rule of what makes a document a primary or a secondary source.*

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.

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.

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.

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.

- Who created it?
- 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?
- What does the document “say”?
- 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.*”

Value:

Now comes the hard part. Putting on your historian hat, you must determine: Based on who wrote it, *when/where* it came from and *why* it was created...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 here.

- What can we tell about the author from the piece?
- What can we tell about the 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?
- Does the author represent a particular ‘side’ of a controversy or event?
- 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?

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:

This is probably the hardest part, and may be skipped when working with much younger children. 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).

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? What part of the story is MISSING because of parts left out?

- What part of the story can we NOT tell from this document?
- How could we verify the content of the piece?
- 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?

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?

Choosing Primary Sources

When choosing primary sources for your classroom, keep the following in mind:

- **Reading Level** – Will your students be able to understand the material? Remember that you CAN choose elements that are above their level, but make sure they are short and that you provide a lot of support on those sources.
- **Interest** – What is the topic of the primary source? Is it something that can relate to the unit you will teach? Is it something that the students can relate to or form their own opinion about?
- **Variety of Sources** – When using groups of documents, it is helpful to choose them from a variety of sources: journal entries, newspaper articles, political cartoons, art, music, speeches, published and unpublished works.
- **Accessibility** – How easy is it to access the documents? Will you view them online? Must you travel to see the document? Can you re-create the document via photocopy or photograph?
- **Length** – How long will it take the students to read and analyze the document? If it is very long, it may be harder to find the central reason you chose it.
- **Varied Perspectives** – When using a group of documents, be sure that you are providing a healthy representation from all sides of the issue. You *can* use a document that is overtly biased as long as you provide the challenging viewpoint. Encourage your students to create their own stance based on a fair assessment of all sides of an argument.
- **Intended Purpose** – How will you be using the document in your classroom? Does the document lend itself to that purpose? If you will be using documents to create a mock trial or oral presentation, be sure to give students documents with enough information for them to form a supported opinion.

There are more and more books being published that are anthologies of various collected primary source materials.

Assessment Activities

As a class or in groups, have students write a chapter of a “textbook” including several of the documents they have analyzed. Or have them add to or alter a textbook you are already using in your classroom.

Hold a mock-trial in your classroom. Have teams of students analyze all of the documents to decide which will help their case most and which will be most damaging. The teacher or another group of students can act as judge and jury.

Present students with a number of different documents from a specific time period and have them “rank” which are “most important” in creating a full picture of the time period or event. Make sure students explain their reasoning.

Using the primary source documents, have students create oral presentations in which they take a stance on an issue using the documents as evidence. Help them practice creating informed persuasive arguments.

Have students write based on a document:

Journal entries require them to take the position of the author of the document. These can be good with younger students. Responses to the document require them to understand the position of the author *and* of the intended audience.

Write your opinion: how does the piece support or defy what we know about the history of the period in question? Does it represent the majority opinion? A minority opinion?

An essay including information from all four OPVL categories could take the form of a museum director explaining why a document should or should not be included in a display of important documents from a specific time period.

Challenge students to choose an excerpt from a longer written document to be put into a pamphlet or textbook for younger students. What parts would you put in? What would you leave out? How would you describe the importance of the document?

Write a news article or story based on the document. This can vary greatly depending on the source.