

OPVL GUIDE

A Strategy for Evaluating Historical Documents

Origin

The acronym OPVL (Origin, Purpose, Value, Limitations) guides us in close, analytical reading. In order to analyze and evaluate a source, you must first know what it is. Sometimes not all of these questions can be answered, but the more you do know about where a document is coming from, the easier it is to ascertain purpose, value and limitations.

Let's start with the source TYPE. 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. However, we can look at these general characteristics:

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 and evaluation. Books commenting on a historical incident 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 documents was received during a specific time period or by a specific audience.

When you evaluate a source using OPVL, you therefore do not need to give the distinction between primary or secondary. Instead, 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.

For example, it is important to note the author's background, like where they are from or when they are writing. The more you know about the author of a document, the easier it is to answer the questions in the PVL categories. 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 in the United States, a General, etc. Knowing he wrote the document in 1754 (when 22-year-old Washington fought in the French and Indian War) versus 1796 (during his second term as President) will also help you understand the context in which the source was created.

Purpose

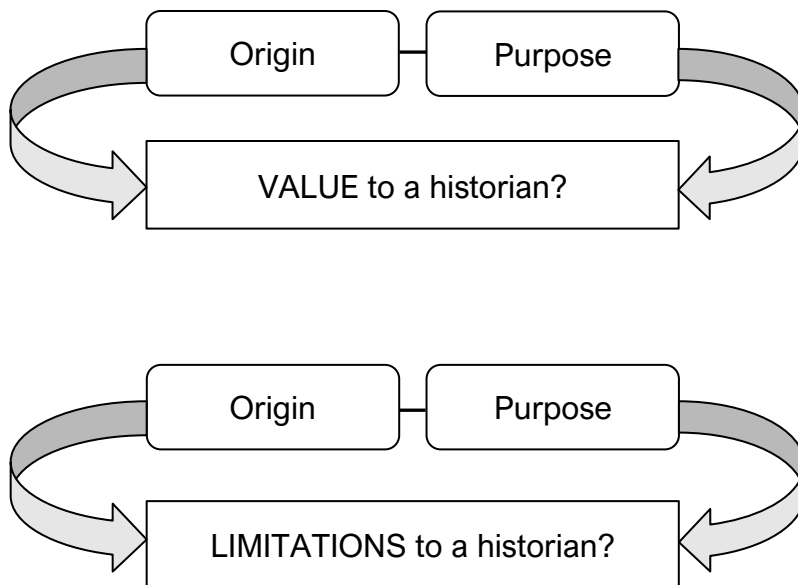
This is the point where you start the real evaluation of the piece and try to figure out the purpose for its creation. You must be able to think as the author of the document. At this point you are still only focusing on the single piece of work you are evaluating.

To find the purpose, you must make an inference about the document. However, you are not guessing. Your identification of the document's purpose must be based on evidence. Think of it this way:

“The document means this... because it is supported by X evidence.”

If the origin is the “Who, What, When, Where” of the source, the purpose is the “WHY?” Why is the author producing this document, writing this book, taking this photograph, etc.? Note the type of source and the intended audience for the source. Consider whether they want to persuade their audience to agree with something, want to give their opinion, or want to inform the reader. You should also think about how the source was first produced – for example, a diary is produced as a private document, so the intended audience and author are the same. How would that affect what's written in it?

Origin and purpose are going to be linked further to value and limitations.



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? What is the usefulness of this source to a historian studying a particular period or topic?

This is where you show your expertise and put the piece in context. Bring in your own knowledge here. 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.

The example tells us what we can learn from the source. Think about how you would use the source if you were to encounter it during your research on that specific topic.

Limitations

The task here is not 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? At what point does it stop being useful?

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), so 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! Think about it – all human beings have their particular biases, therefore all documents they produce will have this as a limitation, but bias can also be of value to historians. 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 (intentionally) leave out? Comment on whether this bias would either be of value to or a limitation to historians, preferably with reference to something specific in the source that the bias seems to affect. Is the apparent bias valuable because we learn about a particular perspective? Or is it limiting because we must be cautious with the message or content of the source?

As with value, this is an area for you to show your expertise of the context. You need to be able to identify 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? Where do need other sources for corroboration?

How to **OPVL**

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| <p>What is the <u>Origin</u>?</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who created it? Who is the author? • What occupation did the author have? What is their social status? • When was it created? When was it published? • Where was it published? (If it was reprinted, look at the original source, not where/when it was reprinted.) • Where is the document from? What country, state, or city? • Who is publishing it? • Is there anything we know about the author that is pertinent to our evaluation? • What specific type of source is this? |
| <p>What is the <u>Purpose</u>?</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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? |
| <p>What is the <u>Value</u>?</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What can we learn from this document? • What can we tell about the author from the piece? • What can we tell about the time period from the piece? • What does it reveal about society? Education? Government? Work? Home life? • 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? • Is the author well placed to know the specific facts he/she relates? • What was going on in history at the time the piece was created and how does this piece accurately reflect it? • Does the date of the source make the facts in the source more valuable? • Does the time in which it was written make the opinions in the documents more valuable? • How does the reason for which the author is communicating to their audience tell the readers something they want to know? |
| <p>What are the <u>Limitations</u>?</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • At what point does this source cease to be of value to us as historians? • What part of the story can we NOT tell from this document? • Do the source require verification? 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? • What is purposely not addressed? • Is the author poorly placed to know the specific facts he/she relates? Why? • Are there specific opinions the reader should be careful about based upon who the author is? • Does the date when the source was produced place limitations upon the specific facts in the source? Upon opinions expressed? • How does the reason for which the author is communicating to their audience give readers a reason to be cautious about veracity or over-generalizations in the document? |

OPVL *for common types of sources*

| Document Type | Origin | Purpose | Value | Limitations |
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| Biography | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nationality of the biographer? The relationship between biographer and the person? Where was it published? When was it published? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Scholarship? Objectivity? For students of history and for the general public interested in history and in the lives of important people? To revise previous interpretations of this person's life? To present an alternative view? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Objectivity Thoroughly researched Access to a wide range of sources and evidence Hindsight New evidence Analysis of events and of a person's contributions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Topic may have only been briefly researched if it is a small part of the person's life Justification for actions/ decisions May not have had access to the full range of sources (for example, if published in the West before the opening of Soviet archives in 1991) Biographer may be influenced by their experience, politics or context Biographer may be writing to entertain – may not have grasp of historical context |
| Cartoon | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Was it drawn at the time? Nationality of the artist? In which newspaper or journal did it originally appear? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> An interpretation of events at the time? Political comment for readers about particular events or policies? Propaganda? If published in another country, is it a positive or negative comment which reflects that country's public opinion? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> A reflection of public opinion at the time in one of the countries involved Insightful analysis of events and policies When governments or regimes censor the press, can be used to portray the government's line | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Biased, influence by the opinion and prejudices of its creator – produced by an artist with a definite point of view Opinionated Does not show the evidence to support opinion May reflect uninformed public opinion May not reflect general public opinion – niche position Play on stereotypes and exaggeration Could be limited to the viewpoint of the newspaper or periodical where published |
| Diary or Journal Entry | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Who wrote it? Was this person a key individual? When in the course of events was it written? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Private reflection? Private reflection with the view to being published later in a memoir? Attempts to justify actions? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Content Eyewitness account If person was part of the decision-making process – can suggest motives for public actions Intimate glimpse into the lives of individuals experiencing historical events Offers insight into personal views or opinions Could be candid and honest Valuable as a study of the personality by whom it was written | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Personal involvement could lead to mistruths, omissions, justifications for actions and undue emphasis placed on certain events Might be written with a view to later publication and therefore wanting to appear in a positive light Limited in scope – One viewpoint/ one interpretation Molded by the opinions, prejudices, and cultural standpoint of the author Needs to be cross-referenced with other primary sources |

| Document Type | Origin | Purpose | Value | Limitations |
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| Drawings or Paintings | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Was it drawn at the time? Nationality of the artist? Commissioned by whom? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Art for art's sake, or produced for commercial distribution? Published / displayed somewhere? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Can capture spirit of a time Contain evidence about culture at a specific moment – customs, styles, preferences, atmosphere, architecture, dress, appearance, etc. Examples of art styles of the time | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Limited to the viewpoint and experience of the artist Influenced by the opinions and prejudices of its creator Limited scope – generally highlights one specific aspect of a period of history If portrait – may only reflect upper class Posed Artist not generally concerned with providing a factual account, but rather with producing a creative piece of work or expressing own opinions or emotions |
| History Text | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nationality of the historian? Where was it published? When was it published? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Scholarship? Objectivity? For students of history and for the general public interested in history? To present original research? To revise previous interpretations of the period or events? To present an alternative view? Broad or narrow focus? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Objectivity Thoroughly researched Access to a wide range of sources and evidence Professionals, experts in the field Have the benefit of hindsight which contemporary sources do not New evidence Analysis of cause and effect | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Topic may have been only briefly researched if extract is only a small part of general history text May not have had access to the full range of sources (for example, if published in the West before the opening of Soviet archives in 1991) Might be expert in another region or era May be influenced by their experience, politics or context |
| Letter | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Who wrote it? Was this person a key individual? When in the course of events was it written? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recipient? Private and candid comments between individuals? Not necessarily intended for public consumption? Attempts to justify actions? Attempts to persuade the recipient to follow a course or action? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Content Eyewitness account If person was part of the decision-making process – can suggest motives for public actions Intimate glimpse into the lives of individuals experiencing historical events Offers insight into personal views or opinions Could be candid and honest | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Personal involvement could lead to mistruths, omissions, justifications for actions and undue emphasis placed on certain events Molded by the opinions, prejudices, and cultural standpoint of the author Selective by nature – more important to note what is excluded than included Informal/personal opinions, not public or official views May be intended to persuade the recipient Needs to be cross-referenced with other primary sources |

| Document Type | Origin | Purpose | Value | Limitations |
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| <p>Memoir Recollections</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Whose memoir/ memories? • Was this person a key individual? • How long after the period was the memoir published or the memories recounted? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attempt to justify actions? • Attempt to remember details of events for later generations? • For the general public? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Content • Eyewitness account • If person was part of the decision-making process – can suggest motives for public actions • Insight into personal views or opinions • Could be candid and honest • Could be a source of valuable information that otherwise would be lost • Valuable as a study of the personality by whom it was written | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal involvement could lead to mistruths, omissions, justifications for actions and undue emphasis on certain events • Written for publication and therefore wanting to appear in a positive light • May be written to apologize for/ justify author’s opinions or actions/inactions • Details/ memory may have become blurred with passage of time • Memories may be molded to conform to views evolved since then (with hindsight) • Needs to be cross-references with other primary sources |
| <p>Newspaper Article or Editorial</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Was the article written at the time? • Or was it written later? • Nationality of the journalist? • In which newspaper did it originally appear? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • An interpretation of events at the time • Political comment for readers about particular events or policies? • Propaganda? • If published in another country, is it a positive or negative comment which reflects that country’s public opinion? • Political stance of publication? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflection of public opinion at the time in one of the countries involved • Insightful analysis of events and policies • Can provide information on the society and its culture or politics • Can provide a daily record of events occurring in history • Provide information on what the public knew at the time | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Editorials – biased or opinionated • Does not show evidence to support assertions • May reflect uninformed public opinion • Could be politically influenced or could be censored by specific governments or regimes • Might only give an overview • Might be too recent of an event – not all the information is known • Commercial motives – exaggeration/ sensationalism to sell papers? • Political agenda of publication |

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| Official Government Document | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Which institution published this material? Was this document a significant document at the time? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Public statement of official policies? Classified document? Propaganda? Facts omitted or exaggerated to suit the audience? Viewpoint of a specific administration? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Content Statement of official policy Might show the government's position or stance on an issue Reaction to various events Statement of intention If never intended for disclosure, might provide a candid glimpse into the inner workings of a government Could be purely factual, solid, reliable Might be a well-informed analysis | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Propaganda? Exaggerations? Only shows one aspect of government policy Does not show reasons or motives behind policy Does not show how or whether the policy was actually implemented Could have been manipulated to conceal information / maintain image of the government concerned Only what the government allows the public to know Very sensitive information can be classified for many years |
| Oral History | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Whose memories? Who collected the history? How was it published? By a specific institution? Time removed from event? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Why were memories recorded? Candid recollections? Part of oral tradition? Interview for publication? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Eyewitness account Provides information about people, especially minority groups, who might have been excluded from mainstream publications or didn't leave behind written accounts Preserves details of historical legacies that may not be included in written accounts Opinions of people who experienced a period of history | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aging of individual – physical and mental deterioration of subject must be taken into account (memory loss, trauma) Identity of interviewer may affect what is shared by interviewee Details/ memory may have become blurred with passage of time Memories may be molded to conform to views evolved since then (with hindsight) Needs to be cross-references with other primary sources |
| Photograph | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Who took the photo? Under what conditions was the photo taken? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Was it originally for private use or the public? Private family photo? Posed? Propaganda? Artistic purpose? Commercial use? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Snapshot of a moment in time Shows how people lived/ dressed/ acted Could be a source of valuable information that otherwise would be lost Can capture moments in history in vivid detail Can offer insight into immediate response to or impact of an event on particular people or a place Reflections of trends in artistic form | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Propaganda Posed Photographer has personal biases and prejudices – consciously or subconsciously reflected in work Can be manipulated by the creator – edited, cropped, focused on certain details, angle Limited view might distort the bigger picture |

| Document Type | Origin | Purpose | Value | Limitations |
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| Poems or Novels | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nationality of author? Personal involvement of author in historical events? When in the course of events was it created? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Art for art's sake, or produced for commercial distribution? To entertain? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Could inform contemporary opinion Might offer insight into emotional responses and motive Provide insight into the spirit and culture of the time May chronicle experiences and feelings of specific individuals Emotional appeal – allow readers to identify closely with circumstances of the time Reflection of trends in artistic form | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Could be a “dissenting” voice (not popular opinion) Could have a political agenda Not solely concerned with providing a factual account – imagination and creative license involved Flavored by biases of the creator |
| Speech | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Who delivered the speech? Was this person a key individual? When in the course of events did it occur? Where was the speech delivered? Who was the audience? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Public statement of thoughts, or of official policies? Propaganda? Facts omitted or exaggerated to suit the audience? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Content Statement of official policy Might show the government's position or stance on an issue Statement of the individual's personal ideas and thoughts Can offer insight into reasons for decisions – motives Reaction to various events Statement of intention Can show what the public is told about an event or issue by government | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Personal involvement could lead to mistruths, omissions, justifications for actions and undue emphasis on certain events Propaganda? Facts omitted or exaggerated to suit the audience Might not reveal dissent or divergent opinion May not explain motives for a decision or a political purpose Needs to be cross-referenced with other primary sources |
| Statistics | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Which institution published this material? Was this document a significant document at the time? Or is it/has it been compiled by a historian as part of his/her analysis? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Public statement of official figures? Propaganda? Facts omitted or exaggerated to suit the audience? Statistics used to illustrate a historian's point? Produced for a specific purpose? | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Content Statement of official figures A historian's summary of facts and figures If reliable, provide raw factual evidence of historical trends Generally open to interpretation, free of personal and cultural biases Might suggest correlations between indicators, or reveal patterns Allow for comparisons | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Propaganda? Exaggeration? Only shows one set of figures Margins of error must be taken into account Does not show the reasons behind the statistics Does not show how these statistics were collected Might represent only a limited sampling, not representative of general population May have been manipulated to corroborate claims or present something in a more positive light Accuracy must be questioned – needs to be cross-referenced with other sources |

