

Origin, Purpose, Content, Value and Limitation (OPC-VL) is a technique for analyzing historical documents.

How to approach:

- Read source again, paying particular attention to the italicized origin of the source. Underline important information.
- Write a structured, explicit response with one paragraph for the value of the source and one for its limitations. (e.g. One of the values of Source C for a historian studying _____ is...).
- Evaluation of the value and limitation should be linked to the origin and purpose of the source as well as the source's content. (e.g. The content of the source reveals one of its limitations, namely that...)
- In each paragraph, write two to three ideas related for the value and limitation of the source.

Things to remember:

- Refer explicitly to origin, purpose, content, value, and limitation.
- Purpose relates to the purpose of the source, not the excerpt.
- Avoid using the word "bias" without stating what kind of bias it is and providing justification from the source.

Origin: To analyze a source, you must first know *what* it is. The more you know about where it came from, the easier it is to ascertain purpose, value and limitation.

- **Primary** – letter, journal, interview, speeches, photos, paintings. Primary sources are created by someone who is the "first person". He/She is presenting original materials as a result of discovery or to share new information/opinions. Primary documents have not been filtered through interpretation/evaluation by others.
- **Secondary** – materials 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: 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 really important. The more you know about the author, the easier it is to answer the next questions.

Purpose: This is the point where you start the real evaluation and try to figure out the purpose for its creation. You must be able to think as the author of the document.

- 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?

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?

Avoid “I think the document means this...” Obviously, if you are making a statement it is coming from your thinking. Practice saying “The document means this...because it is supported by x evidence.”

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

Value: Thinking as a historian, you must determine: Based on who wrote it, *when/where* it came from, what is information is included 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?
- How does the information from the document help us?

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 it 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 it 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 comment on bias, go into detail. Who is it biased towards/against? What part of a story does it leave out? What part of the story is MISSING because of parts left out and why is it 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?
- How does the information from the document NOT help us? What content is missing?

This is 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?

Solid Example of OPVL:

Extract B²

A primary source this poster was produced by Viktor Deni, a leading poster artist for the Bolsheviks, in 1920. The purpose is to promote the Bolshevik war effort. Deni depicts Trotsky as Saint George slaying the counter-revolutionary dragon. Saint George being the patron saint of Russia allows Trotsky to project the image of defender of Russia and Communism. The original myth claims that Saint George protected himself with the holy cross; however the poster shows Trotsky defending himself and the Russian people with a shield imprinted with the hammer and sickle, representing the workers and peasants he was defending. The image of Saint George slaying the dragon came from the Moscow Coat of Arms. The source is valuable because it demonstrates Bolshevik hostility to the Allies and emphasizes Trotsky's valuable role as War Commissar during the Civil War. The Bolsheviks' use of visual imagery in propaganda demonstrated their ability to reach a broader audience, including the large illiterate peasant masses of rural Russia, however also demonstrated the narrow selection of facts and the appeal to emotion rather than reason. The source is limited because it was produced as propaganda representing a very subjective view portraying the Bolsheviks and Trotsky as the saviors of Russian pride, while portraying the Allies as imperialists.

Word Count: 212

SOSO Example of OPVL

Heavy water and the wartime race for nuclear energy is the second of the two sources and were written by Per F Dahl in 1999. The book gives excellent coverage over the Vemork plant and heavy water citing the history and importance of the Norsk-Hydro plant in Rjukan. The book traces back production figures and important personalities surrounding the Vemork plant, which makes this book important due the quantitative evidence make this book unique in the research about German atomic bomb. This book essentially digs out detailed information about the Vemork facilities, sabotage and the fuss surrounding heavy water at the time of Nazi occupation. The limitation of this book is that the author is a physicist and not a historian, and at times this book showers the reader with figures and more figures as several times the author is telling a story more than proving a point. As the author is a physicist, the analyses of facts are absent.

Word count: 300