

**A Guide to Origin, Purpose, Value and Limitations
(OPVL)
IB History of the Americas**

Name; _____

A Guide: Origins, Purpose, Values, Limitation

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:

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?

Quick Reference Questions for OPVL:

Origin

1. Who created it?
2. Who is the author?
3. When was it created?
4. When was it published?
5. Where was it published?
6. Who is publishing it?
7. *Is there anything we know about the author that is pertinent to our evaluation?*

Purpose

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

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?

Limitations

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?

OPVL Chart

Document Type	Origin	Purpose	Value	Limitations
Diary Entry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is it a primary source? • 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 • Person was part of the decision-making process • 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. • Might be written with a view to later publication and therefore wanting to appear in a positive light. • Needs to be cross-referenced with other primary sources.
Letter	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is it a primary source? • 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 and candid comments between individuals? • Not necessarily intended for public consumption? • Attempt to justify actions? • Attempt to persuade the recipient to follow a course or action? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Content • Eyewitness account • Person was part of the decision-making process • 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. • Might be written with a view to later publication and therefore wanting to appear in a positive light. • Needs to be cross-referenced with other primary sources.
Speech	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is it a primary source? • Who delivered the speech? • Was this person a key individual? • When in the course of events did it occur? • Where was the speech made? • 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 • Statement of the individual's personal ideas and thoughts • Reaction to various events • Statement of intention 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal involvement could lead to mistruths, omissions, justifications for actions and undue emphasis placed on certain events. • Propaganda? • Facts omitted or exaggerated to suit the audience. • Needs to be cross-referenced with other primary sources.

Document Type	Origin	Purpose	Value	Limitations
Memoir Recollections	<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 • Person was part of the decision-making process • Could be candid and honest • Could be a source of valuable information that otherwise would be lost 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal involvement could lead to mistruths, omissions, justifications for actions and undue emphasis placed on certain events. • Written for publication and therefore wanting to appear in a positive light. • Needs to be cross-referenced with other primary sources.
Official Government Document	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is it a primary source? • 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? • Propaganda? • Facts omitted or exaggerated to suit the audience? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Content • Statement of official policy • Reaction to various events • Statement of intention 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Propaganda? • Exaggerations? • Only shows one aspect of government policy? • Does not show the reasons behind the policy. • Does not show how or whether the policy was actually implemented.
Statistics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is it a primary source? • 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? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Content • Statement of official figures • A historian's summary of facts and figures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Propaganda? • Exaggeration? • Only shows one set of figures • Does not show the reasons behind the statistics. • Does not show how these statistics were collected.

Document Type	Origin	Purpose	Value	Limitations
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 revise previous interpretations of the period or events? • 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 cause and effect 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Only an extract • Topic may have been only briefly researched because it is only a small part of general history text. • May not have had access to the full range of sources especially if published in the West before the opening of Soviet archives in 1991 or before the publication of the Chinese “literature of the wounded”, for example.
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"> • Only an extract • Topic may have been only briefly researched because it is only a small part of the person’s life. • Justification • May not have had access to the full range of sources especially if published in the West before the opening of Soviet archives in 1991 or before the publication of the Chinese “literature of the wounded”, for example.
Photograph	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is it a primary source? • Who took the photo? • Was it originally for private use or the public? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Private family photo? • Posed? • Propaganda? 	<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 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Propaganda • Posed

Document Type	Origin	Purpose	Value	Limitations
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 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Biased • Opinionated • Does not show the evidence to support opinion • May reflect uninformed public opinion
Newspaper Article or Editorial	<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? 	<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 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Biased • Opinionated • Does not show the evidence to support assertions • May reflect uninformed public opinion

Source: _____

Category	4 Exemplary	3 Adequate	2 Minimal	1 Attempted	Scores:
<p>Origin Who What When Where</p>	<p>(either you got it right... 4 points</p>	<p>.....</p>	<p>.....</p>	<p>.....or you didn't) 1 point</p>	<p>/4</p>
<p>Purpose Why</p>	<p>Demonstrates strong understanding of author and/or time period and purpose for various types of primary sources</p>	<p>Demonstrates some understanding of author and/or time period and purpose for various types of primary sources</p>	<p>Demonstrates some understanding of author and/or time period or purpose for various types of primary sources</p>	<p>Demonstrates little or no understanding of author and/or time period and/or purpose for various types of primary sources</p>	<p>/4</p>
<p>Value for a historian studying...</p>	<p>Offers a valid response with two or more accurate and relevant values of the document</p>	<p>Offers a valid response with two or more insights that are somewhat accurate or relevant to the value of the document</p>	<p>Offers a response with one or more insights that may be inaccurate or irrelevant to the value of the document</p>	<p>Response is lacking or completely inaccurate and/or irrelevant to the value of the document</p>	<p>/4</p>
<p>Limitation for a historian studying...</p>	<p>Offers a valid response with two or more accurate and relevant limitations of the document</p>	<p>Offers a valid response with two or more insights that are somewhat accurate or relevant to the limitations of the document</p>	<p>Offers a response with one or more insights that may be inaccurate or irrelevant to the limitations of the document</p>	<p>Response is lacking or completely inaccurate and/or irrelevant to the limitations of the document</p>	<p>/4</p>
					<p>/4</p>