

Analyzing Primary Documents

OPVL Analysis

Primary documents enable historians to get as close as possible to what actually happened during an historical event or time period. A primary source reflects the individual viewpoint of a participant or observer. Primary documents preserve the memory of past events. Examples include government records, letters, speeches, diaries, merchants' account books, literature, pictures, etc. However, no single primary source gives historians a complete or totally unbiased picture. Each has its perspective, value, and limitations. It is imperative to critically analyze primary documents in order to gain a useful and coherent picture of the past.

Use the OPVL acronym to remind you of questions you should be asking when analyzing documents.

ORIGIN

In order to analyze a source you need to know where the document came from. The more information you have regarding its origin the easier it is to ascertain its purpose, value, and limitations. Who created the document? Who is the author? When was it created? When was it published? Where was it published? Who is publishing it? What do we know about the document's creator?

PURPOSE

Purpose is where you have to put yourself in the author/creator's shoes. Why does the document exist? Why did the author create this piece of work? Why did the author choose this particular format? Who is the intended audience? What is the author's point of view? What point is the source trying to convey? Can it tell you more than what is on the surface?

VALUE

Value is how valuable this source is for a historian. 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 historical evidence? What can we tell about the author from the document? What can we tell about the time period from the document? How does the document reflect the circumstances under which it was created? Does the author represent a particular 'side' of a controversy or event?

LIMITATIONS

The task here is to evaluate at what point the source ceases to be of value to a historian. What part of the story/event/controversy can we not tell from the document? Does the source inaccurately reflect anything about the time period? What does the author/creator leave and why does he or she leave it out (if you know)?