

### ASSIGNMENT 3: Using OPVL to Test Source Reliability

Both historians, and readers of history, must continually measure the reliability of their sources of information. Not all sources are created equal. The problem of source reliability is particularly significant when it comes to using online resources like websites. People are drowning in the sheer amount of information available; and when it comes to information presented online it's easy to find sources that simply parrot what we assumed to be true, e.g. if you believe in a flat earth or aliens created the pyramids you can find websites confirming that assumption. In reality we do not want information that confirms what we *believe* to be true; we want information that accurately represents what happened or what is actually happening. Therefore, it makes some sense to test and measure the reliability of information before we incorporate it into our essays, presentations, or knowledge base.

Scholars developed the OPVL approach to analyzing sources to assist them in making judgements about the origin, purpose, value and limitations of resources. The following is a basic introduction to the four components of the OPVL method including definitions and some guidance questions students will find helpful to ask themselves when analyzing a source.

**Origin:** this refers to the setting, time, and personality (or culture) that created a source. Some potential questions a student of history could ask to explore origin are listed below:

- When was the document created?
- Who created it?
- Where did it first appear?
- Are there any special cultural considerations to take into account when reading this document?
- Is it a primary or secondary source?
- What was the historical context in which it was created?

**Purpose:** focuses on the intention or purpose behind the creation of the source in the first place. Some potential guidance questions are:

- Why did the author/culture create the document?
- Who is the intended audience?
- What was the intention of the author?

- Is the document intended specifically for fellow scholars or for popular consumption?

**Values & Limitations:** although these two attributes can be treated separately they cover essentially the same ground. Specifically, the values relate to ideology or beliefs of the document's creator while limitations make reference to the boundaries or potential problems affecting a document.

- What information was available to the author that might not be available elsewhere?
- What important information was *not* available to the author? For example, consider when the document was created and if any subsequent scholarship has revealed something new about an event or personality.
- Did the author get information from a reliable source?
- Does the author have reasons to emphasize certain facts over others to a particular audience? Might the author present the story differently to a different audience?
- What specific information might the author have chosen to leave out?
- Does the author concede a certain point that is inconvenient to him/her to admit to?
- How might the historical context in which the document was created influence the document's author?
- How might the document's original historical context affect our own understanding of the document's reliability?
- Could the document's author have made use of better, more reliable sources?
- To what extent is this resource reliable or relevant to incorporate into an essay or presentation?

If you use the OPVL method, odds are you'll answer several of the questions listed above. If you do use these questions, ensure that the paragraphs you produce aren't just composed of disconnected answers to the questions that don't transition or segue efficiently from one to the next. Students must ensure at all times that ideas from logically and smoothly from one to the next.

**Purpose:** visit and analyze the two web sources below and then write a summary on the reliability of these using OPVL.

**Procedure**

- 1). Read and evaluate the reliability of the source below called *A Look at the Dark Ages: When Things were Really Medieval* (drawn from the website found at <http://medieval.stormthecastle.com/essays/a-look-at-the-dark-ages-when-things-were-really-medieval.htm>).
- 2). Write one response paragraph discussing each of the source text's origin, purpose, value and limitations (four paragraphs total). The guidance questions above will prove helpful in developing your answers. Each paragraph should be a minimum of 75 words in length.
- 3). Finish the task by writing a concluding paragraph explaining exactly why or why you would not consider this source reliable.

**A Look at the Dark Ages: When Things Were Really Medieval**

The Dark Ages were a period of great upheaval, constant war, horrendous plague, and stagnant cultural growth. But through these difficult centuries new ideas and a new culture was born. And in today's world we still feel the effects of these changes that were brought about during these Dark Ages.

The Dark Ages is a period generally accepted as having begun in the year 410 with the fall of Rome and ending in 1095 CE with the launch of the First Crusade. The fall of Rome sets a good understanding for what the Dark Ages were all about because for centuries the Roman Empire was a unified force that brought stabilization to most of Europe. It had a vibrant trade and commerce industry supporting a reasonably secure lifestyle for millions of people. When Rome fell, this network of trade and commerce collapses and the European World was set into chaos. It took seven hundred years of wars, plague, and poverty before the continent came out of it and was moved into the Renaissance.

**Medieval Warlords and the Struggle to be Emperor**

Before it fell, Rome had been the center of the European world for seven hundred years. The emperor ruled over everything and when this all fell the concept of one man ruling the world still remained. It was this aspiration to rule over everything that perpetuated the darkness of the times. Lords from all over Europe were engaged with each other in battles for land and power. This battling lasted literally centuries and it meant a constant drain of resources and a standstill in cultural growth.

**Outside Forces Make It Worse**

This constant struggling for power within the continent of Europe made it very easy for outside forces to penetrate into the continent and further wreak destruction and drain wealth and resources. From the north Vikings constantly invaded and plundered and from the south Moorish invaders brought war and the word of their prophet. The whole continent was under the constant pressure of three points of attack –from within and from both the north and south.

### **The Plague Negates All Progress**

Throughout the first century of the Dark Ages Europe made slow but tangible progress and Emperor Justinian was on the verge of reuniting the continent when the bubonic plague hit and killed tens of millions of people. This destroyed all hope of reunification and kept the continent in chaos for several more centuries.

### **The Force that Brought Us Out of the Darkness**

Christianity was an ideal that rose to power during the dark ages and many warlords of the time embraced it. This had a unifying force on the entire European continent and even though there were many kingdoms they all swore allegiance under the pope. This brought an end to the internal fighting that had been going on for centuries and this unification was solidified with the launching of the Crusades beginning in 1095. This gave all the various warlords and kings a common religious goal and a foe they could join together and focus on.

The Crusades, while being for the most part a failure in that they held very little of the land they attempted to conquer, were a significant factor in the rebirth of Europe in that Europe was reunited under a common religion and returning crusaders brought back with them to Europe a wealth of new information in architecture, medicine, philosophy, mathematics and many other areas. This infusion of ideas, paired with the end of constant war within Europe set the stage for the Renaissance.

The Dark Ages were an extraordinarily difficult period in the story of humanity. It is estimated that 100 million people died at the hands of war, poverty, and plague. But during this time new ideas and ideals were born and much of the groundwork was laid for the world we know today.