

Different types of contexts

**Social context** – how do features of the society in which the text is set have an impact on meaning.

**Cultural context** – what were the expectations and attitudes that were considered normal for the time and place in which the text is set.

**Historical context** – the economic, political and religious events that influenced the writing of a text; when was it written and where is it set.

Context can also cover **literary context** or the genre of the text.

Context can also refer to responses from different audiences.

Remember!

You only have to include context in the essay questions.

You DO NOT need to include context in the extract question.

Assessment objectives

- AO1 Respond to texts critically and imaginatively; select and evaluate relevant textual detail to illustrate and support interpretations.
- AO2 Explain how language, structure and form contribute to writers’ presentation of ideas, themes and settings.
- AO4 Relate texts to their social, cultural and historical contexts; explain how texts have been influential and significant in different contexts and at different times.

Context

Context is only one of the areas that you are being assessed on; the text that you have studied should be the main focus of attention. It is also important to note that the social and cultural aspects of the text are just as important as the historical elements. You should focus carefully on answering the question. Questions which assess AO4 have been structured to help learners focus on this aspect of the texts in their responses. It will remind you to write about how a character, relationship or theme in the text you have studied is affected by the time and place in which the novel or play is set.

What to include

You need to include information about the social, historical and cultural background of your chosen text where it’s relevant to the question you are answering, but avoid general information that isn’t linked to the question. A lot of information about the Wall Street Crash and its impact on farmers in 1930s America might not be that important when answering a question on Curley’s wife, for example.

Avoid sweeping statements about what society and its people were like in the past. Black people were not forbidden to speak to Whites in 1930s America – but there was widespread discrimination and segregation, as depicted in *Of Mice and Men* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*.

AO4

Most candidates know that AO4 means ‘context’, but context comes in many forms. It might be useful to think about the contexts of production and reception, i.e. when the text was written (produced) and the different audiences who have read it or seen it (reception). When thinking about the context of production, a helpful question to ask is: ‘which ideas/concepts in the novel or play would I not understand/fully appreciate if I didn’t know something about the time it was written?’ For example, it could be argued that if we know that Dickens spent time in a debtors’ prison when he was a child, then we read the descriptions of the Cratchit’s living in poverty as realistic accounts rather than just imaginative descriptions in *A Christmas Carol*.

Top tips

It is important to remember not to become too carried away with learning a lot of biographical details.

You are not being asked to write a history or sociology essay.

Knowledge of the text is always the most important thing.

Context should drive your points or argument about a text, rather than be bolted on to demonstrate knowledge.