

# Context

## Definition of Context

Context is the background, environment, [setting](#), framework, or surroundings of events or occurrences. Simply, context means circumstances forming a background of an event, idea or statement, in such a way as to enable readers to understand the [narrative](#) or a literary piece. It is necessary in writing to provide information, new concepts, and words to develop thoughts.

Whenever writers use a quote or a fact from some source, it becomes necessary to provide their readers some information about the source, to give context to its use. This piece of information is called context. Context illuminates the meaning and relevance of the text, and may be something cultural, historical, social, or political.

## Examples of Context in Literature

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### Example #1: *A Tale of Two Cities* (by Charles Dickens)

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Dickens begins his novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*, in 1770, by describing the release of Doctor Manette from Bastille, before taking the story to 1793 and early 1794. In this time span, the narrative covers a broad story. In a larger view, this novel begins in 1757, while its final scene looks forward to the situation of the post-revolutionary Paris.

This story has a historical context, which Dickens has organized around various events that occurred during the French Revolution. He has drawn historical features from major events, including the fall of Bastille, the September Massacres, and the Reign of Terror. This backdrop is the story's context.

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### Example #2: *Animal Farm* (by George Orwell)

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George Orwell felt disillusioned by Soviet Communism, and its revolution during his time. In the phenomenal novel, *Animal Farm*, Orwell has expressed himself by using [satire](#) through the allegorical characters of Old Major and Boxer; relating them to the Russian Revolution and its characters. Orwell uses animals to explain history and context of Soviet Communism, some of which relate to party leaders. For instance, the pig Napoleon represents Joseph Stalin, and Snowball represents Leon Trotsky. In fact, Orwell uses this [fable](#) for political and aesthetic reasons, following the Russian Revolution as its context.

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### **Example #3: *Dr. Faustus* (by Christopher Marlowe)**

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Historical context of Christopher Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus* is religious, as it hints at cultural changes taking place during Marlowe's time. In 16th century Europe, there was a [conflict](#) between Roman Catholicism and the Protestant English Church. During this entire period, Calvinism was popular within the English churches; however, it was controversial. According to Calvinistic doctrine, the status of the people was predestined as saved or damned. Scholars and readers have debated on the stance that Marlowe's play takes regarding the Calvinist doctrine, in whether Faustus is predestined to hell or not. The Renaissance period provides context for this play by Marlowe.

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### **Example #4: *Oedipus Rex* (by Sophocles)**

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There is a popular saying that stories indicate values and cultures of the societies in which their authors live. In *Oedipus Rex*, Sophocles presents his [protagonist](#), Oedipus, struggling to implement his will against the destiny set forth by the Greek gods. During this process Sophocles reveals Greek values of the period during which he wrote the play.

He has illustrated the context of this play through the words and actions of Oedipus and other characters; as their Greek ideals concerning their governance, fate, and human relationships with the gods. These were some of the more popular themes of that era, and so form context of the *Oedipus Rex*.

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### Example #5: *Lord of the Flies* (by William Golding)

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“While stranded on a deserted island, a group of boys believe there is a dangerous creature lurking in the underbrush; Simon is the first to identify this menace, suggesting to the boys that ‘maybe,’ he said hesitantly, ‘maybe there is a beast’.”

This excerpt provides an excellent example of context, as it narrates an incident involving a group of young men on a deserted island. Context describes why they were afraid, giving a clear picture of the situation and setting.

### **Function**

Context is all about providing a background or picture of the situation, and of who is involved. Context is an essential part of a literary text, which helps to engage the [audience](#). If writers ignore context, they may overlook a critical aspect of the story’s intent. Without context, readers may not see the true picture of a literary work. Context helps readers understand the cultural, social, philosophical, and political ideas and movements prevalent in society at the time of the writing.