

## HOW DO I WRITE ABOUT CONTEXT? A Guide to Understanding Context

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Director Simon Dormandy explores what context means, why it matters and how to write about it for English and Drama, using examples from William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* and Dennis Kelly's *DNA*.

In this guide, you will find:

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## WHY LEARN ABOUT CONTEXT?

*Because it makes reading books and seeing plays so much more enjoyable.*

It's possible to enjoy a text or a performance without knowing anything about it except the words on the page or the actions of the performers. But as soon as you start discovering more about the context—the time and place the story is set; who it was written for and what they thought; events of the time reflected in the work; the writer's life and beliefs; etc.—your understanding becomes richer and more detailed and the play becomes more interesting and enjoyable.

Context—sometimes called 'background information'—is important first and foremost simply *because it makes reading books and seeing plays more enjoyable*. But it is also important because it helps you to understand more and more about them (as it does for all works of art). And through books and plays we learn more and more about human beings; the way we behave and the world in which we live, which is, after all, the whole point of literature, theatre and art.

Context is an essential, living part of being an intelligent reader and theatregoer, which is why exam boards stress it in their syllabuses and teachers make it central to their teaching.

### So, what is context, exactly?

Context is *relevant* knowledge from *outside* a text or performance that helps you to understand it better and enjoy it more. For instance, as long as you could understand the words, you could enjoy a performance of *Julius Caesar* without knowing anything about ancient Rome, or Elizabethan London, or Shakespeare and his theatre. But each bit of relevant knowledge about those things that you can bring will add extra detail, colour, energy and fun.

Let's start with an extreme example. What if you didn't know that *these things actually happened*? Imagine how much more exciting the story would seem when you discovered that Caesar was indeed brutally murdered in public by a crowd of senior politicians in their equivalent of



Parliament to stop him becoming king, and that, apart from some details, the play is a pretty true account of the whole ghastly business, right through to the civil war that followed and the end of a great and ancient democracy. Contextual knowledge like that adds hugely to the thrill, the meaning and the significance of the play.

But, of course, you knew *Julius Caesar* was “based on a true story”, so here’s something you may not have known that I think makes the play even more urgent and meaningful: Elizabethan Londoners liked to think of their city as a second Rome and themselves as the closest thing in their world to the great, ancient Romans.

### How does that change the play for you?

For me, it changes it from a curious tale of far away and long ago into a political thriller set in contemporary—i.e. Elizabethan—London, where the ancient and famous story is a way of speaking in code about the dangerous situation in England at the time. This was a time when speaking openly could put you in prison, or worse. Add to that the knowledge that the Queen had survived a series of assassination attempts and that, because she had no heir, nobody knew what would happen if one finally succeeded.

People believed that monarchy was the best way to run a country and that the safest way to pass on the crown was from parent to child. But Elizabeth had no children and had refused to name an heir, so England was facing a terrifying future and an unstable present. As a result, senior members of the government were planning how to govern without a king or queen until a replacement could be nominated – in other words, they were thinking about setting up a temporary republic. And the best-known example of a republic in action was ancient Rome. And what everyone knew best about the Roman Republic was that it collapsed into a terrible civil war when Julius Caesar was murdered.

It must have been electrifying to go to a play in which everyone’s worst fears were brought to life. A sick, ageing leader (just like Elizabeth) is assassinated (a very real possibility for the Queen), in Rome (which London loved to compare itself to) with the result: bloodshed. It’s amazing it was allowed to be staged at all, especially when the assassins, however



misguided, are the heroes and the victim (Caesar / Elizabeth) is arrogant, over-confident and self-deluded.

### How is context applied in the theatre?

Like any director, I want to tap into the most powerful forces shaping a play, so knowledge of this exciting context radically alters my perspective. Suddenly, it seems vital to try and create the same immediacy that Shakespeare's audience felt in 1599. My reaction is to try and do the same thing: just as Shakespeare used the story of Julius Caesar to talk about his own time, I want to use Shakespeare's play to tell a story about mine. So, I would set it in contemporary dress in a contemporary city and work with my team of designers and actors to draw as many parallels between our own times and the play as possible.

I speak from experience because I recently directed just such a modern-dress production of *Julius Caesar* which was designed to look like a modern democracy under threat from a "strong man" leader like Putin, Erdogan, Trump who sets out to take absolute control. I will return to that production later, but my point is this: *context*, far from being a mere exam game or highbrow intellectual pastime, *is an absolutely central and life-giving power in the hands of anyone directing, designing or acting a play*, and so it should be central for readers and students of literature.

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## WHAT KINDS OF CONTEXTS ARE THERE?

Context is a very broad category, but it is often broken down into historical, social and cultural. What do these terms mean? Here's one way of unpacking them:

| HISTORICAL<br>CONTEXT   | SOCIAL<br>CONTEXT  | CULTURAL<br>CONTEXT  |
|---|--|--|
| Information about <b>things that happened in the real world</b>                                   | Information about <b>beliefs, behaviours and conventions</b>   | Information about <b>literary and theatrical forms and conventions</b>                                   |
| For example, recent assassination attempts on Queen Elizabeth or the fact she was old and unwell. | For example, that London was a 'second Rome' or that it was dangerous for a monarch to have no heir. | For example, that plays were often written in verse and performed outdoors in front of a standing crowd. |

Breaking it down further, contextual information can apply to different aspects of a play:

- to the world of the play, its location and period
  - e.g. ancient Rome as opposed to Elizabethan London
- to the world of the author, their life, beliefs and work
  - e.g. what Shakespeare knew about Caesar, or thought about monarchy
- to the world of the original audience, who first read or saw the play
  - e.g. what the crowd at the Globe believed about ghosts or gender roles
- to the world of a modern audience, reading or watching the play today
  - e.g. comparing Caesar to Trump or being critical of his treatment of women.

Putting it all together, you could categorise your contextual information in a chart like this:

|  | HISTORICAL<br>CONTEXT   | SOCIAL<br>CONTEXT   | CULTURAL<br>CONTEXT  |
|--|---|---|--|
| <b><i>The world of the play</i></b>              | These were the last days of the Roman Republic, which had lasted 500 years.   | Roman aristocrats believed suicide was a noble death.                                       | This was Shakespeare's second play set in ancient Rome.  |
| <b><i>The world of the author</i></b>            | Shakespeare was at the peak of his career, opening <i>As You Like It</i> and <i>Hamlet</i> in the same year as <i>Julius Caesar</i> . | Shakespeare seems to have had mixed feelings about the monarchy.                            | Some believe Shakespeare himself may have played Caesar.   |
| <b><i>The world of the original audience</i></b> | All England was worried about Queen Elizabeth being assassinated or dying without an heir.  | Most Elizabethans believed in ghosts and supernatural omens.                                | The majority of the audience would have been standing, just like the crowd at Caesar's funeral.              |
| <b><i>The world of a modern audience</i></b>     | We are seeing democracy under threat again all around the world.  | A modern audience might assume democracy is better than monarchy; an Elizabethan might not. | To us, Shakespeare is 'high art'; to an Elizabethan, his plays were, first and foremost, good entertainment. |



## TASK

Choose a play that you know reasonably well. Think about what you enjoyed about it in relation to plot, characters and themes. Prepare a short piece of persuasive writing (up to 250 words) about why you think your friend should read it too.

- Afterwards, fill in the template below with relevant information from your chosen play.
  - Use this information to prepare a supplement to your piece of persuasive writing (no more than 150 words) about why it's *important* that your friend should read it.
  - Reflect on how this changes the effectiveness of your argument.
- 





TEMPLATE

|   | HISTORICAL<br>CONTEXT | SOCIAL<br>CONTEXT | CULTURAL<br>CONTEXT |
|---|-----------------------|-------------------|---------------------|
| <i>The world of<br/>the play</i>                  |                       |                   |                     |
| <i>The world of<br/>the author</i>                |                       |                   |                     |
| <i>The world of<br/>the original<br/>audience</i> |                       |                   |                     |
| <i>The world of<br/>a modern<br/>audience</i>     |                       |                   |                     |





## THE GOLDEN RULE

### The only good context is relevant context

Context is only interesting for a reader or spectator *if it is relevant*. It needs to clarify the meaning of the play or add weight to a point you are making, otherwise it's a waste of space. In blunt, exam terms: a paragraph at the start of an essay which unloads a heap of facts onto the reader without relating them to the play will get few, if any, marks.

### What are the rewards of intertwining text and context?

Doing this is a bit harder than just popping in an introductory paragraph of half-digested wiki-knowledge, but that's the point: because it's harder, it gets more marks. And it teaches you the skill of reading, watching or making a play, which involves more than passive consumption: it involves thought.

- Have you ever read the same text twice with a long time in between each reading?
- Did you remember it one way and then discover it was like an entirely different experience the second time round?

This shows that you have been engaging with a text rather than passively consuming it. And if it seemed different, it is perhaps because your thoughts on its contents—or even your entire way of reading—have evolved. Developing your ability to read contextually will also change the way you experience a text.

When you read, watch or make a play, you should keep *both* things—text and context—in mind all the time, repeatedly switching between a wide-shot (your knowledge of the broad landscape the play came from) and a close-up (the detailed reading of moments). Reading, watching or making plays should be about pleasure but it shouldn't be passive; good readers and spectators *engage* with the play, which means they think about it *as well as* just soaking up the experience. And thinking about it makes it all the more pleasurable.



The introductory paragraph approach is ok *if* you relate its knowledge to the text at the time, and *if* you refer back to it a few times as you go on to the rest of the essay but it's ultimately less impressive than integrating context throughout your argument.

## How can you integrate context?

So, try to distribute context points all through an essay and weave them in with your points in exactly the same way as you weave in quotations, or detailed descriptions of moments on stage. You have probably been taught some version of the 'PEA' formula, where 'PEA' stands for Point, Example, Analysis (or PEE – Point Evidence Explanation, etc). When it comes to writing about plays in performance, and at the risk of overdoing the mnemonic thing, I suggest a slightly expanded formula, PEA(C)E, standing for:

- Point
- Evidence
- Analysis
- (Context)
- Effect (for performance essays where audience impact is important).

Here's an example from an imaginary look at the start of Act 2, Scene 2 of *Julius Caesar*:

| PEA(C)E          | EXAMPLE  |
|------------------|--|
| <b>P</b> oint    | <i>"Caesar is presented as vulnerable and homely when he enters"</i>       |
| <b>E</b> vidence | <i>'in his nightgown'.</i>   |
| <b>A</b> nalysis | <i>This contrasts with his first entrance in Act 1 in formal clothing.</i> |



|         |  |
|---------|--|
| Context | <i>It would have been a surprising sight for an Elizabethan audience who thought of Caesar as a proud and dominant general.</i>    |
| Effect  | <i>This entrance makes the audience question Caesar's public image: is he an immortal hero or an old man in declining health?"</i> |

## What's with the brackets?

The brackets around Context are to show that you don't need to refer to context in *every* point. Once or twice per paragraph is plenty. The most important thing is your detailed understanding of the play or performance. Context is part of that mix but it doesn't need to be ever-present. If PEA (plus E for performance essays, where audience impact is important) is the cookie dough, nuggets of C are the chocolate chips.

## A warning

Formulas like this are all very well but nobody wants you to write like a robot. The best writers adapt advice like this to suit their needs. Yes, you do need to make sure *all* your points are supported by well-chosen evidence and that you analyse the techniques being used and the effects they have and that you sprinkle it all with frequent references to context. But, once you've got the essential idea, you should feel free to vary the order from point to point: mix it up and make it flow.

## How do I know which bits of context are relevant?

The short answer is that *context is relevant in an essay if, and only if, it improves the point you are making.*

But it can be hard to know what contextual information to gather when you can't know exactly what questions you'll be asked. In practice, when studying a particular play for a specific board, it's pretty easy to come up with a manageable page or two of notes that will apply to any question – you really don't need a lot because the most important facts will be relevant to almost every task. But that's not something a general guide like this can help with because different plays benefit from different kinds of contextual knowledge.

For instance, when reading, staging or studying *The Glass Menagerie*, it is a huge help to know a bit of the biography of its author, Tennessee Williams, because the play is based closely on his own life. But biographical knowledge can be misleading with Shakespeare because he is such a great writer that he disappears into his work. Knowing about Germany in the 1920s is essential to getting the most out of Brecht's plays, but historical knowledge is far less useful when studying Beckett, where philosophy and a knowledge of slapstick routines are much more relevant. To narrow the field for the plays you are studying, consult your teachers, or look at any decent study guide for the main facts and topics, and then do as much reading around the play as you can, guided by their advice.

A general guide like this is also unable to give specific, exam-board-specific tips, because, while context is required by most specifications in both Drama and English Literature, the way it is credited differs between subjects as well as from board to board and, even within any one specification, from component to component. Still, the point remains that context should always be central to your thinking because it's an essential element of any intelligent reading or watching of a play.

### How does context apply to a modern play?

It's easy to see how reading, watching or performing in a play like *Julius Caesar*, written a long time ago, can be enriched by knowing about the very different world from which it came. But what if the play was only written a few years ago, is set today and concerns people just like us living in a world we know intimately – how can one find and apply relevant context?

To answer this, I am going to take ***DNA* by Dennis Kelly** as an example.

*DNA* is set in England among students around 16-years-old or thereabouts who are at school together. So, there is almost no distance between the world of the play and the world of any UK-based school student. This is partly because the play was written to be performed by teenagers as part of the National Theatre's Connections series of plays for schools.

But not only is this play really close to the world of its likely audience, Kelly strips it of many of the things that might offer easy jumping-off points for contextual research: a specific location in time and place, background stories for the characters, references within the play to political or sociological events outside of it, themes from cultural or philosophical debates, etc. The locations are generic, described using the indefinite article as “A Street”, “A Field” and “A Wood”, making the town where the events take place seem universal: a kind of anywhere. We learn very little about the offstage lives of the characters – their families, teachers, beliefs or values – and Kelly says that “Names and genders of characters are suggestions only and can be changed to suit the performers”, so they are deliberately non-specific in almost every way. There are no references to real events at the time, or discussions of hot-button topics in the media or on the internet. It is a strikingly spare, stripped-back script.

### So, is contextual information irrelevant to *DNA*?

Absolutely not. You just use different information. And the huge advantage we have when studying almost any play written in the last hundred years is that we can nearly always draw on the words of the writers themselves, as well as those of the original director, designers, actors and audiences. It may be a piece of minimalist writing, but we don’t need to guess what it meant at the time; we can hear it from the people themselves. And, in the information age, a quick google will nearly always produce everything you need. In the case of *DNA*, a great deal of the most valuable context arises from interviews that [Dennis Kelly](#) has given about the play. These lead one into researching the specific period when it was written, which is inevitably slightly but significantly different from our own. But having the author’s words as a guide (and/or those of the director, designers, actors, theatre critics and audiences), the research topics are already laid out for you, so it takes less work.

For example, Kelly has spoken of his sympathy for the way the media and government look down on young people. Well, any quick google of the main news stories from the time he was writing *DNA* shows that England in the early 2000s was obsessed with scare stories about “hoodies” – supposed teenage delinquents with no sense of right and wrong, and without ambition or purpose. Kelly’s play draws on those fears and examines what might be behind such kinds of behaviour.



The media in 2007 were also fascinated by the dangers of using DNA to fight crime, worrying that imprisoning people on DNA evidence could lead to injustice – which is precisely what happens in the play. At the same time, the vast Human Genome Project had recently produced a complete map of our genes and people were wrestling with a new version of the age-old question: are we made by our biology or our environment; which is more important, nature or nurture?

And so on. This is not a study guide on *DNA*, but I hope you can see how, as soon as you start to look, there is at least as much contextual material available for a modern play as there is for an old one, if not more.

## TASK

- Think about two texts you've read from different time periods:
    - How do you relate to them differently?
    - How might a contextual reading change that experience?
- 



## CONTEXT IN PRACTICE

The following table contains a scene from *Julius Caesar*, with a column for context and another on how it might be applied lined up with the relevant text. The contextual knowledge useful to a reading or performance of *Julius Caesar* is more about history and theatrical conventions. No doubt, if *Julius Caesar* had been written in 2007, we'd be poring over interviews with Will Shakespeare and Dicky Burbage, and watching YouTube clips of attempted assassination attempts on the Queen...

| JULIUS CAESAR                 | CONTEXTUAL INFORMATION  | APPLICATION   |
|-------------------------------|---|---|
| <b>ACT 2, SCENE 2</b>         |   |   |
| <i>Thunder and lightning.</i> | <p>Sound effects at the Globe were created with drums and thunder sheets. There were no strobes or lighting of any kind apart from daylight, so lightning would be a sound effect, too.</p> <p>The influence of God or the gods over the weather was still a widely-held belief in Elizabethan England.</p> | The wild weather, being less an all-embracing illusion in the Globe than in a modern theatre, would have seemed more intentional than a mere natural phenomenon, suggesting the anger of the heavens than just a bit of rough weather. Modern designers may want to make sound and lighting effects exaggerated and less naturalistic to give a modern audience a similar level of dread and awe. |

|   |  |  |
|---|--|--|
| <i>Enter CAESAR, in his night-gown</i>            | Caesar was famed as a powerful general and a proud, boastful man.                | Seeing him in a nightgown would have been surprising. Designers might want to create a costume that places special emphasis on weakness and the soft comforts of home.   |
| <b>CAESAR</b>                                     |  |  |
| Nor heaven nor earth have been at peace to-night: | Actors in the Globe spoke directly to the audience – there was no ‘Fourth Wall’. | By directly confiding in the audience, Caesar’s fears would seem stronger and more private. Actors might think of making this aside particularly fearful or confiding – not relaying facts so much as looking for comfort in shared fears. |
| Thrice hath Calpurnia in her sleep cried out,     |  |  |
| 'Help, ho! they murder Caesar!<br>Who's within?   | Dreams were considered by many Elizabethans to foreshadow future events.         | The actor playing Caesar might want to treat this outburst as useful information; Calpurnia’s dream could contain intelligence about potential assassins. “I wonder who the murderer might be?”  |



|   |  |  |
|---|--|--|
| <i>Enter a Servant</i>                          |  |  |
| <b>SERVANT</b>                                  |  |  |
| My lord?  |  |  |
| <b>CAESAR</b>                                   |  |  |
| Go bid the priests do present sacrifice         | 'Priest' and 'sacrifice' were words used a lot in Elizabethan church services. | These terms would have seemed less 'pagan' to an Elizabethan audience than to us today. Caesar is simply doing something everyday, like checking the weather forecast. The actors involved might want to act it in a matter-of-fact way. |
| And bring me their opinions of success.         |  |  |
| <b>SERVANT</b>                                  |  |  |
| I will, my lord.                                |  |  |
| <i>Exit. Enter CALPURNIA</i>                    |  |  |
| <b>CALPURNIA</b>                                |  |  |
| What mean you, Caesar? think you to walk forth? |  |  |



|   |  |  |
|---|--|--|
| You shall not stir out of your house to-day.      | It was the convention in Elizabethan times for the wife to obey the husband and not to issue commands.   | Calpurnia might be overstepping her status in the marriage, so the actors and director might want to explore the nature of their relationship: is Caesar 'hen-pecked'? Might this have been funny at the time, when men's and women's roles were more rigidly defined? Or is this a strong but conventional marriage and is Shakespeare, by having Calpurnia overstep her status, hinting that she is wildly distressed and going 'too far' in order to save his life, which might make the actors' movement more extreme, such as physically blocking the door. |
| <b>CAESAR</b>                                     |  |  |
| Caesar shall forth: the things that threaten'd me | There had been several high-profile assassination attempts on Queen Elizabeth but, like Caesar, she continued to "walk forth" and make public appearances. | How would a modern production add extra dread to this moment, to mirror an Elizabethan's fear of political assassination? Perhaps an extra shiver of thunder or crackle of weird lightning?  |



|   |  |   |
|---|--|---|
| Ne'er look'd but on my back; when they shall see  |  |   |
| The face of Caesar, they are vanished.  | Caesar's story was well-known to an Elizabethan audience. They would have known he was a phenomenally successful general. They would also have known what was about to happen – he would be dead within an hour or two – and this prediction would shortly be proved false.  | This moment is clearly intended to be heavy with “dramatic irony” (when the audience knows something a character does not). An actor might therefore wish to mark Caesar's over-confidence by his use of voice and gesture to make it clear to a less-well-informed audience today.   |
| <b>CALPURNIA</b>  |  |   |
| Caesar, I never stood on ceremonies,<br>Yet now they fright me. There is one within,<br>Besides the things that we have heard and seen,<br>Recounts most horrid sights seen by the watch.<br>A lioness hath whelped in the streets;<br>And graves have yawn'd, and yielded up their dead; | More Elizabethans believed in supernatural phenomena like this than people do today. What we call science was, for them, still bound up with alchemy, astrology and superstition. In earlier scenes, Casca, Cassius, Cicero and Brutus have all reported strange phenomena similar to this, and in <i>Hamlet</i> , the cool-minded Horatio reports these apparitions as historic facts. Later in the play, the | Because she is far from alone in treating these things as real, the actor playing Calpurnia might want to avoid being over-emotional here and present her report as factual not emotional. Caesar – who has just asked a servant to have priests make a sacrifice to predict the future – is more likely to be persuaded if she recounts these coolly as hard facts not |

|   |  |  |
|---|--|--|
| Fierce fiery warriors fought upon the clouds,       | audience will see an apparition with their own eyes: the ghost of Caesar.                                  | emotionally as nightmare-like visions.   |
| In ranks and squadrons and right form of war,       |  |  |
| Which drizzled blood upon the Capitol;              |  |  |
| The noise of battle hurtled in the air,             |  |  |
| Horses did neigh, and dying men did groan,          |  |  |
| And ghosts did shriek and squeal about the streets. |  |  |
| O Caesar! these things are beyond all use,          |  |  |
| And I do fear them.                                 |  |  |
| <b>CAESAR</b>                                       |  |  |
| What can be avoided                                 |  |  |
| Whose end is purposed by the mighty gods?           | Most Elizabethans believed to some extent in “providence” – the idea that our fate is in the hands of God. | Caesar’s belief, like Calpurnia’s in the omens, is mainstream for the times, so the actor playing Caesar might want to treat this as cool, common sense not a brag about special treatment by the heavens. |
| Yet Caesar shall go forth; for these predictions    |  |  |
| Are to the world in general as to Caesar.           |  |  |

|  |  |   |
|--|--|---|
| <b>CALPURNIA</b>   |  |   |
| When beggars die, there are no comets seen;              |  |   |
| The heavens themselves blaze forth the death of princes. | Social rank was believed by most Elizabethans be approved by God; status was not achieved by what individuals did alone but with the help of heaven. | Calpurnia is simply stating what many would believe to be literal truth. The actor might want to treat this as a good argument not emotional overkill.  |
| <b>CAESAR</b>  |  |   |
| Cowards die many times before their deaths;              | At the time, Caesar was often presented as vain and conceited – full of misplaced pride.   | Caesar's first words in the scene show that he is taking the possibility of his death seriously. This speech might therefore be a cover-up or brag. The actor might like to make this clear using body language that suggested overconfidence and vanity. |
| The valiant never taste of death but once.               |  |   |
| Of all the wonders that I yet have heard.                | "Wonders" were astonishing phenomena. Caesar is comparing the fear of death to the apparitions Calpurnia has just described,                         | The actor playing Caesar may want to "quote" the word "wonders" so the audience are clear he is making this comparison  |

|   |  |  |
|---|--|--|
|   | saying the fear of death is the strangest “apparition” of the lot.   | between the fear of death and ghosts walking in the street.  |
| It seems to me most strange that men should fear; |  |  |
| Seeing that death, a necessary end,               |  |  |
| Will come when it will come.                      | Stoicism was a popular Roman philosophy. This acceptance of death, whenever it should come, is Stoic in character. | Because this is a philosophical position not just a personal feeling, the actor playing Caesar might behave in a “teacherly” manner, perhaps patronising Calpurnia as if explaining the idea to a child. |
| <i>Re-enter Servant</i>                           |  |  |

## TASK

Choose a small part of a scene from a play you find quite challenging. Break the excerpt down into lines and research contextual information for each line. You could use what knowledge you already have, ask a friend or teacher what they know or look online.

Once you have some substantial contextual information, think about how this might be applied in performance. Knowing what you do about context, how would you want the lines to be delivered if you were the play's director?

To show how subjective an experience this can be, you could work on the same lines as a friend (separately) and then compare your tables at the end.



| LINE | CONTEXTUAL INFORMATION | APPLICATION |
|------|------------------------|-------------|
|      |                        |             |
|      |                        |             |
|      |                        |             |
|      |                        |             |
|      |                        |             |
|      |                        |             |
|      |                        |             |
|      |                        |             |







## DO PROFESSIONAL THEATRE-MAKERS USE CONTEXT?

They certainly do, to a huge extent.

It might feel like context is just an exam game the boards ask you to play but this is far from the truth. The research and application of background information—another phrase for context—is a major part of any thorough, professional rehearsal process.

The director will research the sources of the text, the history of its production over time, the place and time when the story is set. The stage, costume and technical designers will all do their own detailed research of costumes, buildings, spaces and events, of light, music, sounds and imagery and bring it all together in the collaborative melting pot of pre-production. And when rehearsals begin, there is often a week or more of tablework, where the text is picked apart line by line by the cast, adding contextual information all the way, while individual actors, if they are any good, will have been steeping themselves for weeks beforehand in histories, biographies, images, paintings, music, etc., that might have a bearing on the world of the play and their characters in it, sniffing out anything and everything might bring the text to life before their imaginations so they can do the same for the audience.

When rehearsals move into blocking, polishing and running, the discussions continually circle around contextual knowledge such as how men and women related at the time, or how soldiers were trained, or what such-and-such a character would have earned, or what people ate or wore and how they worshipped. Context, in fact, is probably spoken about in rehearsals almost as much as the text itself.

### TASK

- To experience this first-hand, work with a friend and choose a short text such as a newspaper article.
- Imagine that one of you belongs to an oppressed minority and the other is part of a ruling elite.





- Respond to the article in character. How different are your experiences of it?
- To what extent do these differences relate to your separate life 'contexts'?

To get a fuller sense of this, look at any of the [Director's Notebooks](#) on Digital Theatre+, or read one of the many books about building a character or rehearsing a play, such as Antony Sher's wonderful account of playing Richard III, *Year of the King*. If you'd like to see how I, personally, work and how important context is to my practice, see my notebook on a production of [Julius Caesar](#). Good sections to go to are those on costume, set and research.

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## CONCLUSION

Context only seems an afterthought if it has been – if you are adding it on at the end of studying a play rather than integrating it into your learning from the start. But, afterthought or not, it is genuinely important: a rich and rewarding source of ever-deeper knowledge, understanding and pleasure. Adapting your contextual knowledge to a specific question for an exam, portfolio or school essay can be a challenge at times, but if you make sure to weave what you know into your writing as you go and don't just dump it on the unsuspecting reader, you will find yourself thinking more deeply about the play, strengthen your argument and get more marks. Studying and writing about context shouldn't feel like a burden: embrace it fully and it will become a lifelong pleasure, and you will become a more sophisticated reader, spectator or theatre-maker.

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