

# GCSE (9–1)

*Delivery Guide*

J352

# ENGLISH LITERATURE

Theme: Exploring context

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Version 2



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# Introduction

Delivery guides are designed to represent a body of knowledge about teaching a particular topic and contain:

- Content: a clear outline of the content covered by the delivery guide;
- Thinking Conceptually: expert guidance on the key concepts involved, common difficulties students may have, approaches to teaching that can help students understand these concepts and how this topic links conceptually to other areas of the subject;
- Thinking Contextually: a range of suggested teaching activities using a variety of themes so that different activities can be selected that best suit particular classes, learning styles or teaching approaches.

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## KEY



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# Curriculum Content

Students following a GCSE English Literature course will develop the skills and understanding to reflect critically and evaluatively on their reading. As part of this experience, they will have an opportunity to reflect on context (Assessment Objective 3) in a flexible way, depending on the text itself and which contexts are relevant. This could be the contexts in which texts are set, for example, those relating to social and cultural situations or experiences. Alternatively, the focus could be on the place and time when an author was writing, and consideration of how this informs his or her writing.

For the OCR GCSE (9-1) English Literature specification (J352), AO3 is covered in Component J352/01 Modern texts (5%) and 19th century prose (5%), and Component J352/02 Shakespeare (5%).

AO3 is defined clearly for each section in which it is targeted, so that teachers and learners understand how context is being interpreted and assessed, in the question papers and corresponding mark schemes. The rationale depends on the nature of the text and the task, so that for Component J352/01 Section A Modern prose or drama, for example, there is recognition of how context can be interpreted in relation to comparison of a familiar, studied text and a same-genre, unseen text. The brief introduction to each extract in the question paper are intended to provide clear contextual information, to allow learners to develop inferences and ideas about relevant contexts. Learners are required to focus their analysis, including reference to contextual factors, on comparison of the extracts in the question paper only. The relevant contextual factors will be concerned with social or cultural situations or experiences, which can be inferred from details in the extracts.

In J352/01 Section B 19th century prose and J352/02 Section B Shakespeare, learners will have knowledge of relevant contextual factors for their studied text. Here, questions are worded to prompt learners to consider relevant social, historical or cultural contexts, or relevant literary contexts, for example, science fiction or gothic (for J352/01 Section B).



# Thinking Conceptually

There is opportunity for context to be integral to any discussion of character and theme in the English Literature GCSE. A common learner misconception is that context is a box to be ticked; a bolt-on that comprises regurgitated factual information or detail. Rather than viewing it as something separate from the text being studied, this delivery guide aims to illustrate that context can throw light on the meaning of texts.

Why is context so crucial to the learner's understanding of a text?

Characters that walk god-like over the surface of their time, unaffected by their context, are a rare species in English Literature.



Context *creates* characters. It informs their words and behaviour.



Characters can submit to their context and blend in.



# Thinking Conceptually

Or they can defy it.



Sometimes when a character doesn't fit into their context, a volatile mix is created.

Imagine zinc and iodine is a book's context, and water is the defiant character that the writer adds to that context.

▶ Click here

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-hQW5a5D5aE>

The flare-up that results is our story. Heroes and villains walk out of this light. Writers pit their protagonists against their

context to create drama and interest. In *An Inspector Calls*, by J B Priestley, Sheila's wealth and comfortable position in her middle class context makes her decision to take responsibility for her actions all the more dramatic. Perhaps Meena in *Anita and Me*, by Meera Syal, demonstrates this even more startlingly. She navigates a mash-up of social and cultural contexts, none of which she feels that she fully belongs to, and unfailingly asserts her individuality in each.

Characters develop and themes surface thanks to the way writers have their characters interact with their context. Context is integral to the alchemy of fiction, and non-fiction too. The suggested approaches to exploring context outlined in this delivery guide, can be used in cross-over work with the English Language GCSE. Comparison of two unseen non-fiction extracts in the English Language GCSE will have relevant contextual factors in common (based on learners' understanding and interpretation of details inferred from the texts). This can support exploration of theme and character and authorial intention just as they can in the English Literature GCSE.

# Thinking Contextually

Context can be social, historical and/or cultural; it can be literary too: genre, for instance, is a context. It can also encompass a range of social or cultural situations or experiences: friendship, relationships, common experiences, for instance. The latter interpretation is particularly relevant for the comparison task in Component J352/01 Section A Modern prose or drama: in class, learners can engage with different texts and begin to discover how understanding of one text is illuminated by its relationship with another. This prepares them for making comparisons between their studied text (printed extract) and a thematically linked unseen modern, same-genre extract in the exam.

Learners can look out for 'clues' with regard to interpreting context. Characters that conform to their surroundings may play the foil to the protagonists that strut and fret against their situation: Macbeth flouts social convention and betrays his king. He seems all the more villainous next to steadfast, loyal Banquo. But that's not to say characters at odds with their context always succeed. Tommy fights but eventually resigns himself to his horrific fate in *Never Let Me Go* by Kazuo Ishiguro; Jane Eyre submits too when she longs for liberty but settles for another kind of service at Thornfield.

The way a character interacts with their context can give rise to the themes and ideas that stories are shot through with. Macbeth's flouting of social context (loyalty to the king; the divine right of kings) helps build the theme of going against nature that runs through the play. Sheila's conflict with her family in *An Inspector Calls* is part of the theme that the collective good aces family loyalty. In *Anita and Me*, Meena's responses to social context (racism in 1960s England) and historical context (glimpses of her family's bloody history in India) are part of the theme of how she matures during the story.

Though not dealt with in the activity ideas here, literary context can also be used to gain a richer understanding of a text too. For instance, once learners are aware that *Animal Farm* by George Orwell is an allegory, the difference it makes to their reading of the text is dramatic. When the Russian Revolution floats into view behind the text, the story transforms. It becomes didactic. The animals' behaviour is infuriating and pitiful and ridiculous, but with an awareness of context it becomes important too. It is human behaviour at its worst; not something we can dismiss. Awareness of literary and historical context here adds a haunting dimension to Orwell's text. Without literary context the picture is incomplete. Awareness of genre can deepen understanding of the 19th century texts too. The gothic conventions that infuse Jane Eyre's formative time at Thornfield fittingly heighten the drama that unfolds there.

Learners should see context as a tool that enables them to crack open texts, both studied and unseen, and helps develop their understanding of character, theme and authorial intention.



# Thinking Contextually

Activities	Resources
<p><b>Teacher Guide 1: Modern texts</b></p> <p>Learners begin with a sentence spoken by a character and trace it back to the contexts that have generated those words. The activity relates to <i>Anita and Me</i> by Meera Syal, but the task can be used to teach context in any of the set texts. The aim is that learners appreciate context as causal and character behaviour as effect.</p>	<p>▶ Teacher Guide 1</p> <p>▶ Handout 1</p> <p>▶ Handout 2</p>
<p><b>Teacher Guide 2: Modern texts (comparing set text and unseen extracts)</b></p> <p>Here context is used to compare the same-genre unseen extract and the set text extract. Learners begin by identifying the contexts that extracts have in common. Next they compare and contrast the characters' behaviour in these contexts. Are they submitting to their context or reacting against it, for instance? From here, the learner is able to weigh the effect of the writer having the character behave in <i>this</i> way in <i>this</i> context. The exercise uses an extract from one of the set texts <i>Never Let Me Go</i> by Kazuo Ishiguro and an unseen extract from <i>Ghostwritten</i> by David Mitchell, which features in the sample assessment materials on the OCR website. Again, this activity can be used with any pairing from the sample assessment materials or an alternative pairing that teachers and learners might source for themselves.</p>	<p>▶ Teacher Guide 2</p> <p>▶ Handout 1</p> <p>▶ Handout 2</p> <p>▶ Handout 3</p>



# Thinking Contextually

## Activities

### Teacher Guide 3: Shakespeare

Learners identify lines in Shakespeare, for instance, that are related to contexts they are familiar with: relationships, friendships, marriage; and also contexts taught to them (historical context, such as the divine right of kings in *Macbeth*, for instance). Then, as with the previous exercise, they consider how the author is using these contexts for effect: dramatic irony for instance, ambiguity of character, or to create contrast with another character.

## Resources

▶ Teacher Guide 3

▶ Handout 1

▶ Handout 2





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