

Quick tip: Context in writing about texts

In your paper, provide the readers of your paper with contextual information for each example and quotation. Assume your reader needs to be informed about the text you're reading in order to understand what you have to say about it.

It's especially important to contextualize the specific parts of the text from which you plan to quote or paraphrase.

For example, here's an excerpt from a Paideia paper on a novel about Latin American immigrants' experiences in the United States.

Throughout the book, the characters associate the United States with a feeling of relative safety. Whenever an event challenges that notion of safety, their sense of feeling at home in the US seems to take a step back. For example, early in the novel, the characters live through the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. Mayor, the young teenage narrator of this part of the story, describes their reaction to the attacks in this way:

It didn't take long before everyone in our building was knocking on each other's doors and convening out on the balcony, standing around stunned and shaking with fear. Nelia Zafon just kept repeating, "What is happening? What is happening? What the hell is happening?" I heard my mom say to someone, "We moved here because it was supposed to be safer! Where can we go after this?" (84).

Granted, this isn't much different from how lifelong American citizens reacted to 9/11. However, it takes on special meaning in this novel because we readers know how much these characters gave up in order to find a safer place to live. Safety is all they have.

Notice how this writer answers all the major questions that a reader might have about the quotation: *who* said it, *what* was happening in the story when it was said, and *how* it develops the claim the writer is trying to communicate.

If the writer hadn't included this context and simply inserted the quotation by writing "According to Mayor," it wouldn't make much sense to a reader who wasn't familiar with the character or the story.

This tip isn't only applicable to literature. In almost all cases, writers should assume that quotations need to be preceded by context. Consult with your instructor to determine how much context to provide.