



How To - Understand and Use Historical Context



What?	Historical context can be defined as the political, social, cultural, and economic environment related to historical moments, events, and trends. Historical artifacts and sources were created within particular worlds and are tied to the political, social, and economic conditions of those worlds.
Why?	Often students have difficulty differentiating how modern thinking does not always apply to the traditions, politics, economics, understandings, and technology of the past. Therefore, it is important to help students place them in the “shoes” of those who came before us.
How?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Help students differentiate between the causes of an event and the context of an event.• Use the enclosed template to help students get “the whole picture” that surrounds an event from the past.• Guide students in interpreting documents such as speeches and political cartoons by using historical context.
When?	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Use Historical Context every time students study an event from the past or present and/or working with primary documents.

Has someone ever misquoted you, or said something that you said but the person who heard got upset and you had to explain the “whole” story? If so, then you know the importance of understanding context. Context is the back story, the whole story, that helps us understand what someone, group, or documents are trying to say. In history, historical context refers to all the events surrounding a specific period in history. Let’s use an example.

Case Study: Christopher Columbus, 1492

The Pinta, Niña, and the Santa María were ships the Spanish queen gave to Columbus to sail around the world. His discovery of the Americas encouraged more explorers and later settlement. Why did this happen?



You may answer the question with the **cause**. Queen Isabella approved Columbus’s voyage to discover new trade routes to India. This is a correct answer.

However, if you are asked, “Why did this happen?” use historical context to answer the question.

Your answer must include the cause and the back story. Queen Isabella approved Columbus’s voyage to explore new trade routes, because the Portuguese already had a head start on the Spice trade. Traveling around the southern tip of Africa took a long time, the Queen and Columbus hoped the new route would be shorter and faster. In this answer, you would explain the cause and the motivation or need for this event (Columbus’s voyage) to happen.



The historical context also mentions that Spain was in competition with Portugal. They sought an advantage over Portugal’s trade routes with route’s of their own. Historical context helps you find other reasons why events happen in the past.

The Historical Context of _____

What?

Where?

When?

Why?

Who?

Differing Opinions About the Event Included...

Conclusions I Can Make About How Historical Context Influenced the Event

The Historical Context of _____

What?

How People Viewed This Topic Back Then...	How People View This Topic Now...