Historical Context

Every piece of historical writing, from the shortest response paper to a five-hundred-page dissertation, relies on historical context. Without context, your facts and figures disappear into irrelevant ether, and your argument crumbles into dust. For this reason, many history-writing assignments specifically remind the author to contextualize the argument. Yet in my experience as an educator, too many students fail to provide proper historical contextualization. This is unfortunate, as context is the foundation upon which you construct your argument. It provides the setting necessary to bring your paper to life and to give your argument clarity.

Papers usually leave out context for one of two reasons. The first is that context is simple enough to grasp, in theory, but sometimes it is difficult to know where to begin incorporating it into your writing. We all know what context is, but we usually only acknowledge the existence of context when it is lacking—in other words, when we find something to be out of context. For example, have you ever gone over to a friend’s house to discover her in the middle of watching a movie you have never seen before? You understand what the characters are saying. The time period and setting are familiar to you. But suddenly, a million questions start racing through your mind: Who is that person and why does he want to kidnap the neighbor’s dog? Is she in love with the butcher? Why are those two people shooting at one another? Ultimately, you are confused because you are lacking sufficient context in which to make sense of everything you are seeing.

The same sort of confusion emerges when you exclude context from your writing. You might have a solid argument and an impressive array of data to include in your paper, but if the reader does not know the context of your argument, your paper falls apart. Consider the famous Boston Tea Party, a seminal historical event leading up to the American Revolution. In arguing how the event was important, you cannot simply explain what happened in Boston on that night. You need to explain the various contributing factors in the American colonies leading up to the event: the French and Indian War, ensuing increases in taxation in the colonies, an increased British presence on the continent, and so on. You need to create the setting for your argument, and that is what context provides. You cannot have an enthralling movie plot without a strong setting, and you cannot have a compelling argument without sufficient context.

The second reason history students sometimes fail to provide sufficient historical context in their papers is simply that they do not think it is necessary. I used to be one of those students: “But Professor Smith, why do I need to provide context? After all, you already know the context. We learned about it in class. It should be self-evident.” This is a common pitfall, and I urge you to be cognizant of it when crafting your paper. One of the central rules when writing a history paper is: Never assume your reader knows what you are talking about. I cannot stress this point enough. Always provide sufficient context for your reader to be able to follow your argument. Certainly, your instructor understands the context in which you are writing. However, learning to write history is not just about writing for your instructor in order to get a good grade. It is about learning to write more generally, in school or outside of school, for work or for pleasure. And in order to do so, you must never forget context.
When you sit down in the future to write a history paper, always spend some time thinking about historical context. The context you provide is the background information your reader needs to follow your argument. It is the equivalent of the setting in a movie and grounds your paper in the appropriate time and place. Without it, history would be meaningless collection of dates and names of little or no informative value. Providing appropriate historical context is the key to writing a stellar history paper.