

Context Shapes Meaning

Use historical and cultural context to interpret a fictional diary scene.

11.P.ST.1 "Context: Develop and apply knowledge of key components of context such as background information, geographic location, cultural influences, time period, and contemporary events when interpreting and constructing texts."

NAME _____

DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK _____ Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline one detail for each kind of context: background, location, cultural influence, time period, and current event. In the margin, label each detail B, L, C, T, or E so you can see how context shapes the scene.

The West-Facing Window

- ① In September 1943, Emi pressed her cheek against the screen of the barrack window at Heart Mountain, a confinement site in northwestern Wyoming. Beyond the barbed-wire fence, dry sagebrush rolled toward a ridge shaped like a sleeping bear. Before the war, her family had run a grocery near Seattle's busy harbor, where rain darkened the sidewalks. Now the government had removed them, along with thousands of other Japanese Americans, from the West Coast after Executive Order 9066. Emi's father still called their one-room space an "apartment," but the thin walls let every neighbor's conversation pass through.
- ② At supper, a radio announcer described fighting in Italy, and Emi noticed her mother turn the volume low. Her older brother Ken had received a questionnaire asking whether he would serve in the U.S. military and swear unqualified loyalty to the United States. The questions had divided families at Heart Mountain because answering could affect a person's future, even though they were already imprisoned without individual trials. Emi did not understand every adult argument, but she understood the silence after the broadcast. The distant war entered their room through the radio, then settled beside the rationed sugar on the shelf.

- ③ Later, Emi folded a paper crane from the wrapper around a soap bar. Her grandmother had taught her the careful creases at New Year's gatherings in Seattle, when relatives exchanged food, stories, and wishes for the year ahead. Emi placed the crane on the windowsill, facing west. To someone who ignores the setting, the small bird might seem like a child's pastime. In this moment, however, it carries homesickness, family memory, and a quiet claim to dignity. The crane does not erase the fence, but its direction toward the coast shows that Emi is measuring camp life against the home she lost.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE _____ Use the passage

- ① Which two details establish the story's geographic setting, and how do they contrast with Emi's earlier home?

- ② How does the background information about Executive Order 9066 help explain why Emi's family lives in a barrack?

- ③ How do the war report and Ken's loyalty questionnaire shape the mood in Emi's room?

- ④ How does the cultural background of the paper crane change its meaning in the scene?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Write a diary opening or speech opening set during a real historical moment different from the passage. Use a moment you have studied, checking uncertain facts in a class source. Weave in background information, geographic location, cultural influence, time period and a contemporary event. Then write a separate sentence explaining how one contextual detail shapes a reader's interpretation. Invent a character's voice, but keep the historical setting accurate.

Historical opening

Write one or two short paragraphs. Include all five kinds of context through the scene or speaker's words.

This image shows a blank sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and extend across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Explain a contextual choice

Name one detail from your opening and explain how it affects meaning.

PART 1 • READ AND MARK

Underline one detail for each kind of context: background, location, cultural influence, time period, and current event. In the margin, label each detail B, L, C, T, or E so you can see how context shapes the scene. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 • ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	Which two details establish the story's geographic setting, and how do they contrast with Emi's earlier home?	Heart Mountain is in dry, sagebrush-covered northwestern Wyoming, while Emi's earlier home was near rainy Seattle's harbor.
2	How does the background information about Executive Order 9066 help explain why Emi's family lives in a barrack?	It explains that the government removed the family and other Japanese Americans from the West Coast, placing them at Heart Mountain.
3	How do the war report and Ken's loyalty questionnaire shape the mood in Emi's room?	They create tension and uncertainty. Emi's mother lowers the radio, and the family falls silent because Ken's answers could affect his future.
4	How does the cultural background of the paper crane change its meaning in the scene?	Because Emi learned it from her grandmother at New Year's family gatherings, the crane represents family memory, homesickness, and dignity rather than only a child's activity.

PART 3 • YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

November 9, 1989, East Berlin. Tonight, my mother left her factory shift early and found our apartment building buzzing. For years, the Wall had cut our city in two, and my uncle's letters from West Berlin arrived only rarely. On television, officials said East Germans could cross the border, though no one in our kitchen trusted the news at first. My grandfather hummed a German folk song while he searched for his coat, and my little sister tucked a photograph of the Brandenburg Gate into her pocket. We joined neighbors walking toward Bornholmer Straße, where people cheered in the cold.

The rare letters help readers understand why crossing the border feels unbelievable to this family.

TEACHER ASSESSMENT NOTES

The two openings are historical fiction, not testimony from real families. Accept accurate historical settings with all five context components and a separate explanation tied to the invented scene. The entry and explanation have separate spaces; there is no numeric word-count requirement. The Berlin sample places the family at Bornholmer Straße, not at the Brandenburg Gate crossing, which opened later. Background checks: National Park Service, Timeline: Japanese Americans during World War II (nps.gov/articles/000/timeline-japanese-americans-during-world-war-ii.htm); Heart Mountain Wyoming Foundation, History (heartmountain.org/history/); State of Berlin, Opening and fall of the Berlin Wall (berlin.de/en/history/8482274-8619314-opening-and-fall-of-the-berlin-wall.en.html). The family memories, rare letters and folk song are fictional details, not claims about every family's experience.