

Historical Context: A Shot in the Arm of Your Paper

Historical context is what separates history from an encyclopedia entry. Both deploy facts and information, but historical writing persuades its audience to *interpret* an event in a particular way. Rarely are facts alone enough to understand an event because the same event can have different meanings depending on the *context* into which it is placed. Even if it appears that the same thing happened in two different time periods or places, chances are people understood those things differently.

A Simple Example...

Take the idea of resisting vaccination. Today, resisting vaccination carries a lot of stigma because it is generally considered to be harmless with great public benefit. And either you or your squirming child gets a lollipop when it's over. Nothing to be afraid of!

When you read that people 200 years ago used to resist vaccination because of the damage it would do to their bodies, it might seem strange. Maybe those people were just ignorant of the miracles of science. Until you put vaccination in appropriate context, you might think they were being overly dramatic. But 200 years ago, a vaccine would have involved cutting flesh open on both arms and legs and spreading infectious material from a diseased cow into the open wounds, eventually turning into massive scars. And you wouldn't even get a lollipop afterwards!

By considering the historical context, in this case, the physical experience of a patient, we are better able to understand people's motivations and attitudes without dismissing them out of hand.

However...

A different context, that of the disease landscape of the time, might change how we think of this event again. Today, most of the diseases against which we are typically vaccinated, have all but disappeared from developed nations, and a percent of people vaccinated can develop symptoms of that disease. Not getting vaccinated means less pain in your arm, no chance of vaccine-induced disease, and a still relatively low chance of contracting the wild disease (Unless the trend catches on!).

Yet 200 years ago, diseases like smallpox devastated entire towns over the course of a few months. When the death toll of a village or city rises to 30 or 40% as the result of an epidemic, not undergoing a painful procedure to protect yourself starts to look less sensible again.

In this way, historians can argue about the *meanings* of particular events while maintaining the same *facts* to be true.

HOW TO FIND MORE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

When a Professor or TA tells you to add more historical context to your argument, they usually mean you made claims that need more support. Context rounds out the story you are telling, illuminating the major players and events that deal with the specific argument you want to make.

Look through your course material again. This time, rather than looking for main ideas or evidence to support your argument, look for events, people, locations, etc. that made the conditions of your argument possible. (Tip: Look at how your professor has organized their syllabus, and think about course readings you're not using.)

Be careful to consider all angles. Look through your lecture notes. Ask yourself: What else was going on in that century, decade, or year? Who else was around? What motivations might these other actors have had? What else was happening in that location?

HOW AND WHERE TO INCLUDE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Now that you have more context at hand, how do you pick what's relevant for your argument? You are looking for the 'Goldilocks' set of conditions that accurately set the scene and that make your argument complex and non-obvious, while still being easy to understand.

Background, but not just any background. Historical context in a paper should be confined to that information that is necessary to understand your argument.

Example: If your argument is about race and medicine in Kenya, readers do not need to understand the ins and outs of British naval strategy, but perhaps they do need to know about British colonialism in Kenya, by which medical knowledge was distributed.

Be as specific as possible. Avoid making big claims about broad trends that you do not have enough space or evidence to support. Look out for vague phrases like 'at that time,' vague nouns like 'people,' vague verbs like 'influence,' and vague pronouns, 'they' or 'it.' Especially watch out for passive voice, which many writers use to obscure the need for detail. (Tip: Need a longer paper? Find those vague areas and add specifics like dates/times/names to flesh them out.)

ADDING CONTEXT DOES NOT MEAN

1. Talking about trends since the dawn of time.
2. Listing every fact you know about the time period/region in which your argument is situated.
3. Including a full biography for every person you write about.
4. Adding unnecessary fluff.