

How to approach a Literature Contextual Question

Have a good overview

Having a good overview of the text you are studying ensures more confidence when selecting and/or completing a contextual question.

You can prepare for your exam by making sure you have a good understanding of the Plot, the Character and the Themes.

The Plot

- What is the text all about? What happens?
- What causes conflict and how is it resolved?
- What is the height of the conflict?
Is it personal, found in the action or **do** the circumstances of setting contribute to the drama?

Although IEB candidates do not need to complete a contextual question in their exam, working through some contextual questions give learners a chance to confirm their knowledge of plot, characters and themes which are often the focus of essay questions.

It is a good idea to draw a timeline of the full action, identifying the points of conflict and their resolution. Make as many notes around the timeline as possible.

Why is it important to know the plot?

- ❖ By knowing and understanding the plot, you can immediately place the extract in context.
- ❖ You are then able to recall what happens before or after the extract. This is important as it is very probable that the extract has been selected as it forms part of a dramatic event, results in one, or follows on from one.

The Characters

- You need to get to know the characters. You read about what they do, but you also need to read between the lines.
- What do their actions and words tell you about them?
- What do other people say about them?
- What are their motivations?
- Are they honest or are they not what they appear to be?

It is a good idea to draw up a character profile or mindmap for each character.

[Remember to include quotes to support your opinions as you may need these if you decide to complete an essay question rather than a contextual question.]

Why is it important to know about the characters?

- ❖ The focus of your contextual question may be related to how and why characters are reacting in a particular way.
- ❖ If you understand the characters, and have an opinion of them, you will be guided to answer the question accurately BUT do remember to look at the question carefully as it may be specific to the extract, or it may require you to consider the character in terms of the full text.

The Themes

- What are the messages or motifs that occur throughout the text?
- What ultimately, does the text say?



Again it is a good idea to draw up a mindmap for each theme so that you know which characters and parts of the plot support a particular theme.

Why is it important to understand the themes?

- ❖ It is quite likely that a theme may be referred to in a contextual question – either specifically, or you may be asked to relate a theme to the text as a whole.

General hints

Skim the questions as well as the extract

Before you decide to answer a contextual question, skim the extract and the questions set on the extract. This will not only give you the gist of the assignment but will also make it easier for you to find answers later. As you read it, the information that you already have stored in your mind will start coming into focus.

Focus on the questions

In order to focus your attention on what is being asked, underline key words in the set questions.

Check to see whether the question is specific to the extract or whether you need to include broader knowledge in your answer: if the former, scan the extract for specific facts or pieces of information from the text.



Check mark allocation

Use the mark allocation as a guide to how long each answer must be. You don't want to waste time writing a long paragraph for 2 marks. Plan your answer and be concise and direct.

Write legibly and number answers correctly

This is particularly important in an exam scenario when a busy marker does not have time to decipher poor handwriting or to guess that your answers have been misplaced. Also, make sure that you cross out words clearly if you make a mistake, or if you want to discard a draft answer.



To complete a contextual question or essay question?

You need to take a few minutes to read through the questions so that you can make a wise decision. Don't panic if you notice that others around you are already writing down answers.

With your knowledge of the text and characters, you should be able to make a fairly accurate assessment of how many of the contextual questions you will be able to answer. Similarly, you can decide whether you would be able to find enough material for the focus of the essay question.

Generally, you know where your strengths lie:

- ✓ If you can write well and can formulate and support arguments, go for the essay.
- ✓ If you are not confident about writing and supporting an argument, go for the contextual question.
- ✓ If you are not sure where your strengths lie, ask your teacher for his/her opinion and be guided by this.

What happens if both questions frighten you?

If you are totally daunted by the first question in the exam paper, leave 3-4 pages blank and continue with other questions. You can return to the question once your brain has started ticking over and what you know starts coming back to you more readily.

But, once you have to decide, be confident that your background knowledge of the plot, characters and themes will support you.

Good luck!



If you want to practise your contextual question answering skills, you can either use one of Macrat's study manuals, or look at our Literature Resource Series which offers essay and contextual questions with memos (selected texts):

<https://www.digital.macrat.co.za/product-category/pdf-mini-resource-packs/literature/>