

Context Journal

Over the course of the semester, I'll ask you to keep a context journal on Blackboard for the readings we do. This assignment is all about working with unfamiliar words and references and is designed to force you to look up definitions and/or contextual information so you understand exactly what a text is getting at. Every time you read an essay in this class, I want you to keep track of words or cultural references you don't quite understand. This will both help you improve your vocabulary and get used to finding definitions to unfamiliar terms. For each day you have a context journal, you'll need to complete enough entries to earn 12 points—you'll see how to earn those points below.

There are two types of context journal entries: Word Entry and Cultural Knowledge Entry.

If you can look up your unfamiliar word in a dictionary, it's a **Word Entry** and worth 2 points. Complete these four steps to earn the points:

1. Type out the whole sentence containing the word. Use quotation marks and put the page number in parentheses at the end. Underline the word you don't know.
2. Take a guess at the word's meaning, and explain your guess to me as best you can.
3. Look up the word and choose the definition that makes sense here. Type that definition, exactly as your source gives it. (Name your particular dictionary—print or online—in parentheses.)
4. Here's the exciting part that helps you really learn the word: Show me your Aha! moment. In your own words, tell me what the whole sentence means.

Sample Word Entry (again, 2 points each)

1. "The corpses of child fighters who had died of thirst marked her way, like cairns" (17).
2. My guess: I know she's lost, and cairns are "marking her way," so I think maybe a cairn is some kind of directional sign.
3. Definition: *A mound of stones erected as a memorial or a marker.* (*American Heritage dictionary*)
4. Explanation: Oh. I see it now: the bodies are marking her way like trail markers.

If it's something bigger than what you can find in a dictionary, turn the unfamiliar reference into a **Cultural Knowledge Entry** worth 4 points. Complete these four steps to earn the points:

1. Write down the thing you need to investigate and the page number on which you saw it.
2. Take a guess at what you think it's referring to, and explain your guess to me.
3. Look it up—on the web, in an encyclopedia, or in any other reliable source (yes, Wikipedia's ok, but try to vary where you look a bit). Find an explanation that makes sense, and share it with me in just a few lines. **Tell me where you got your info:** name your source in parentheses.
4. Then show me your Aha! moment. Write a few sentences explaining how understanding this reference helps you better understand the reading.

Sample Cultural Knowledge Entry

1. Investigating: East Coast Hip Hop as the nation's musical conscience (172).
2. My guess: I'm confused. People always seem angry at hip-hop because it seems to have no conscience. I've heard a lot of hip-hop that celebrates violence, drugs, and being rich.
3. Results: East Coast Hip Hop, also known as "Old School" hip hop, was born long before the hip hop that's popular now. It came from the Bronx, a mostly-black section of New

York City, when a group of DJs started mixing music for block parties. This was around 1974, when the Black Power movement was alive and well and improving the lives of black citizens: for the first time ever, residents of the Bronx were well-employed, were being policed fairly, and were making strides toward educational equality. And that momentum kept building—activists were organizing neighborhoods and running for office and getting people involved in justice issues. And they used hip-hop to do it. East Coast hip-hop revolves around themes of social justice and revolution. It's different from the more popular West Coast hip-hop (also called Gangsta Rap) which fits with my original ideas about hip-hop. But East Coast, according to its fans and historians, represents music's best hope for speaking out against racism, oppression, and inequality. (Info from a book by Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*.)

4. Now I understand why hip-hop could be the music of revolution. I didn't know that there were two distinct kinds of hip-hop, or that they differ so much. Like most folks, I'd heard mostly West Coast hip-hop...but now that I know the difference, I want to seek out more East Coast stuff. And I see how hip-hop could be used to help listeners keep thinking about what's morally right.

For each day that you have a Context Journal due, you'll need to post your journal to Blackboard before you come to class. Include enough entries to total 12 points—6 word entries, 3 cultural knowledge entries, or some combination. Be ready to share what you learned in the class's discussion of the readings.

This assignment is slightly adapted from Heal McKnight, a composition instructor at Kirkwood Community College in Cedar Rapids, Iowa (which is the school my brother attends and my sister graduated from). I found it in "The Most Annoying Assignment Ever": Helping Composition Students Navigate New Vocabulary," published in the May 2010 issue of Teaching English in the Two Year College.