

sample **four**

context: *Exploring Issues of Identity and Belonging*
text: *The Mind of a Thief*
prompt: 'Our identities are shaped by the places where we feel we belong.'
style/form: Hybrid – persuasive/imaginative (letters to the editor: three shorter pieces)
assessment: High

Written explanation

Letters to the editor are a forum for expressing personal experiences and beliefs and the way these relate to larger community events, and the Context ideas surrounding identity and belonging are well suited to discussion in this format: many people's ideas about who they are relate to their community and yet are deeply personal. Writing three short letters enabled me to address multiple perspectives about how place and belonging relate to identity. It also allowed me to discuss ideas similar to those expressed by some of the minor characters in *The Mind of a Thief* (such as the idea that others are sometimes given permission to define one's identity or right to belong) as well as ideas not explored in the set text (for example, identity that is not tied to place).

I was interested in how different people might respond to this prompt. Identity can be shaped in many ways, and while place is important for some, others define themselves and their sense of belonging in terms of other aspects of their life, such as family. The starting point for the letter-writers to explore such ideas was an (imaginary) article in the *Wellington Times* about the building of a new cultural centre in Nanima.

Writing from the perspectives of three different imagined characters also allowed me to use language in several ways. Ally from Nanima writes casually, using words such as 'reckon', while Louisa from Fitzroy is more formal and businesslike in her phrasing, such as saying she would like to 'note' that she has no 'objection' to the cultural centre. At the same time, all three letters share common features: they are in the first-person, they use personal anecdotes to support their opinions, and they are often emotive (such as when Ally says she feels invisible). These conventions of the form allow the writers to appeal to their audience: general readers of the newspaper (in this case the *Wellington Times*, a small local newspaper), who will then hopefully support their views.

Identifies form, linking it to both purpose and Context.

Coherent explanation of how authorial choices allow the piece to address the prompt.

Discusses how the response draws on and develops ideas from the set text.

Expands on opening sentence, clarifying the purpose of the piece.

Demonstrates understanding of the possibilities of the form.

Uses metalanguage to coherently discuss personal authorial choices and their impact.

Identifies audience.

Letters to the editor

Don't let us become invisible in our own place

Last week I read a story about setting up a cultural centre on the Town Common. I reckon it's a really important thing to do, because it can help those of us who belong here know our selves, connect with each other, and teach our children about who they are and where they belong.

Introduces main contention straight away, while raising Context ideas (how belonging, culture and place are connected).

I'm from Nanima and my family's from Nanima. My grandma wasn't proud of her home – it defined who she was, and not in a good way. She went to school in Wellington and she was teased because she was one of the mission kids. She never wanted to tell anyone who she was because they'd know she was from here. But she still never left here, because it was where she belonged.

— *Develops Context ideas presented in set text.*

But now, nobody even really knows about Nanima – when I go away from Wellington to visit some cousins near Sydney, I don't even say I'm from Nanima, I say I'm from Wellington and I don't even know who that makes me. It's like I'm invisible when I'm far from where I belong. My cousin in Sydney goes to university and she says she is proud to tell people she's from Nanima, but she only speaks English and nobody in the city even knows she's Wiradjuri. But I guess this is where she feels like she belongs, even when she's far away, so that's who she believes she is. Doesn't really matter if her friends think she's someone different. Unless she wants to come back here and claim land one day – then someone else will have to define her: the Elders or the Government, someone will have to say who she is, and does she belong here.

— *Explores prompt; place can determine identity.*

— *Expands Context ideas – sometimes identity is determined by others.*

Nanima Reserve is falling apart now, and us who live here are sometimes embarrassed about it. We have no school, no hall anymore: unless we build a community centre, maybe none of us will know who we are, because the place we are from is disappearing. The Aboriginal Land Council and the Wellington Council could both help us – but do we belong to either of them? Are we caught between councils – maybe we don't belong anywhere? Maybe that's why we feel invisible?

— *Informal phrasing helps construct character; appropriate to form.*

I hope we can build something to help remind us that we belong here because of who we are.

— *Coherent structure: ties ideas back to contention in opening paragraph.*

Ally, Nanima Reserve, Wellington NSW

— *Appropriate sign-off; feature of the form.*

Share the place we care about

— *Subheading summarising the letter's perspective; appropriate to the form.*

My family is from Wellington and I still live on my granddad's farm. This has been my home all my life.

There's been a lot of talk about a cultural centre here and I think it's a great idea that should be supported. Maybe it can help heal some of the conflict and the disagreement that emerged during the Town Common claim years ago. So many people feel as though their identity is tied up in the land here, and we all have different connections to it.

— *After introducing himself, the writer summarises his opinions; appropriate to the form.*

Where you come from, where you belong – it does matter. Many cultures have even followed naming practices that identify their location of origin, tying identity tightly to place, to home, to the area we are genealogically connected to. If you lived in ancient Greece, or Western Finland in the early nineteenth hundreds, or sixteenth-century Poland, or if you are a contemporary Armenian, English, Persian, French, or one of many other nationalities, you might have a last name that identifies you as belonging to a particular geographical place. No matter where you are in the world, who you are will always be linked – right there, in your name, for everyone to see – with where you belong. Maybe you've never even lived in or been to that place, but because your family came from there, there's a good chance you'll have some sense of connection or belonging to that place. It's a very public statement about your identity: this is where my family are from, this is the place I have a special association with in the world.

— *Integrates real-world evidence from beyond the set text to respond to the prompt.*

— *Shapes ideas and arguments relevant to the Context.*

<p><i>Shows sophisticated understanding of ideas relevant to Context.</i></p>	<p>—————→</p>	<p>But many of us know nothing about the people who live in our own town. If we had a cultural centre, maybe we could find ways to explain to each other what this place means to us, and how it shapes who we are. Maybe we could even find ways to negotiate our conflicting needs for ownership of this place. Maybe we could all share our differing senses of belonging here, and nobody would have to reconstruct a sense of self – we could learn to respect each other and our different identities, and understand the reasons we feel this land is important. Without this understanding, our connection to place will continue to cause conflict between us, because of who we see ourselves as, and how we fit in with other people.</p>
<p><i>Concludes with strong statement of opinion, to convince audience (appropriate to form).</i></p>	<p>—————→</p>	<p>So let's build a community centre, and build a community we can all be a part of. John, Wellington NSW</p>
<p><i>Formal language choices contrast with other letters and help convey opinions.</i></p>	<p>—————→</p>	<p>Not everyone believes that where they come from is who they are I would like to respond to the article published in the <i>Wellington Times</i> last week, about building a cultural centre in the town. I would like to note, up front, that I have no objection to the centre. If the community want it and will support it, by all means, go ahead.</p>
<p><i>Challenges the prompt; shows understanding of the complexities of relevant Context ideas.</i></p>	<p>—————→</p>	<p>But I don't think it matters where a person comes from. The article suggested that everyone's sense of identity depends on their home and the places they belong to. Maybe that's how it is for some people, but it doesn't describe me and my family.</p>
<p><i>Variation in structure (leaving personal detail until third paragraph) contrasts with previous letters and holds readers' interest.</i></p>	<p>—————→</p>	<p>My husband grew up in Wellington, and we visit every year to see his father and brother who are still there. But we live in Melbourne now, and my husband doesn't define himself in terms of where he grew up. He cares about his family there, and I suppose he belongs there in some sense, but it isn't who he is.</p>
<p><i>Expressive writing; this paragraph explores Context ideas beyond the set text.</i></p>	<p>—————→</p>	<p>At the lab where I work, nobody knows where I'm from. They don't know that I was born in Ireland and I don't think they'd care. Who I am, for them, is defined by what I do and how I behave: I'm reliable, I have a good sense of humour, I'm a bit forgetful. If you asked one of my colleagues who I am, they would answer you in terms of my personality, my work, maybe even my family, if they know me well. I identify myself as a mother, a scientist, a wife, a soccer player (I'm a member of our local club), a friend. Nobody defines me by my geographical or even cultural background: not me, not others who perceive my identity from the outside. I belong in Fitzroy right now, because that's where my family are, but maybe next year or in ten years I'll belong somewhere else, and I'll still be the same person.</p>
<p><i>Concludes by summarising argument; appropriate to the form.</i></p>	<p>—————→</p>	<p>I think it's vital to remember that although place is important to some people (both indigenous and non-indigenous residents of a place) it doesn't always make you who you are. Where I belong will change, but my identity as a mother, as a scientist, and as <i>me</i> will stay the same, no matter where I am. Louisa, Fitzroy VIC</p>

Additional Reading

It is important to further your understanding of 'Identity and Belonging' with examples apart from the texts your school has chosen. Additional reading will enable you to develop a greater knowledge base, meaning you'll possess a wider (and more creative) perspective for essay prompts. Area of Study 2, or 'Writing in Context' encourages students to use multiple resources in writing. This means you can use examples of identity and belonging from news, history, literature, personal experiences etc. There are no limits to what examples you can use in your Context essay. Below are some ideas to get you thinking about identity and belonging outside VCE texts:

Australian media

1. Violence towards international students
2. Queensland floods
3. Victorian bushfires
4. Australian multicultural society
5. Proposal for Islamic school in New South Wales
6. Invanhoe Girl's Grammar School ban on same-sex couples at formal
7. Indigenous Austalians and non-indigenous Australians
8. Asylum seekers
9. Immigrants

International media

1. Libya's Berber people fight for their identity
2. Genetic engineering including 'designer babies'
3. Islamification
4. Sunnis and Shias
5. Argentina's fight for gender identity

Events in history

1. War of Independence
2. Women's suffrage
3. Tiananmen Square massacre
4. The Holocaust
5. The Khmer Rouge
6. The Stolen Generation
7. The Apartheid
8. Vietnam War

These are only a few of the many 'Identity and Belonging' issues that have occurred in current media and history. Research further and see what other 'Identity and Belonging' examples you can find.

People's issues with identity and belonging

1. Rosa Parks
2. Nelson Mandela
3. Martin Luther King
4. Adolf Hitler
6. Osama Bin Laden
7. Barrack Obama
8. Benazir Bhutto

Remember that the people listed above are famous and have made their mark on the world. Explore individuals that may have influenced the world but are less recognised. Also consider people you know personally who may have *influenced* your identity and belonging.

Quotes on identity and belonging

1. "The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others." - Mahatma Gandhi
2. "If you understood everything I said, you'd be me." - Miles Davis
3. "Who are we but the stories we tell ourselves, about ourselves, and believe?" - Scott Turrow
4. "Nothing is original. I am the best combined effort of everyone I've ever known." - Chuck Palahniuk
5. "Most people are other people. Their thoughts are someone else's opinions, their lives a mimicry, their passions a quotation." - Oscar Wilde
6. "My identity might begin with the fact of my race but it didn't - couldn't - end there. At least that's what I would chose to believe." - Barrack Obama
7. "At least when one speaks of oneself is passionate, well-informed and specific" - Jan Neruda
8. "Never forget what you are, for surely the world will not. Make it your strength. Then it can never hurt you." - George R. R. Martin