

Summer Reading 3: "Within the Context of No-Context," by George W. S. Trow (*rhymes with "throw"*)

Due Date: Sunday, 2 August, 11:59 p.m. Eastern Daylight Time

Committed Reading

- Job number one: to discern the writer's **purpose** and put it into words. Use a **verb of action**, in the infinitive form: The purpose is (for example) *to narrate, to recount, to describe, to explain, to challenge, to question, to examine, to reflect on, to define, to establish, to enumerate, to classify, to compare, to liken, to appraise, to discredit, to dismiss, to debunk, to posit, to honor, to praise, to shame, to exhort, to inspire, to show us . . . something or someone; or perhaps to call us to action, to rouse us to do something, or to persuade us* (or some particular person or audience) of something.
- If the paragraph above contains words you don't know, **look them up**, and **hand-write their meanings in a notebook** that you'll bring to school with you in September.
- In reading, note all large **assertions**—claims about the world, about life, about human nature, about *how things are*.
- Look up **every word** and **every name** (of a person, place, political or social or academic or artistic movement or style, or historical event) that's new to you, and **write it down** in the notebook already mentioned.

You are expected to look up every unfamiliar thing and person mentioned in everything we read. That's our duty. It's how we educate ourselves.

That means finding out

- **what it was or is**
- **what it did or does**
- **when it happened or lived**

You are NOT ALLOWED to read, listen to, or in any other way take in anything *about the text you're reading*, no matter from where or from whom it comes. Not from AI, not from any book or magazine or podcast or website, not from Mom, Grandpa, or any classmate, friend, or enemy. Confront the text on your own and *deal with it as best you can*.

How to Submit Your Work

- **Hand-write on lined white paper.**
- **Scan your work with a document-scanning app** or on an **office scanner**. Your cell phone should have a scanning app. (In iPhone, open "Notes," poke around till you see an eyeball icon. Click on that; it should open a menu that includes "Scan documents.") **Scan in strong, even light, with no shadows falling on the paper. Hold the lens right over the center of the page, so we see a proper rectangle.**
- **Send your scanned page(s) to H. Runyon via Teams chat** or as an **e-mail attachment**.

George W. S. Trow

was an American journalist, essayist, and media critic. Born in 1943, he spent most of his working life—1966 to 1994, according to Wikipedia—at *The New Yorker*. "Within the Context of No-Context" is his best-known work. He died in 2006.

"Within the Context of No-Context"

appeared, with no warning and no explanatory notes, as a "Reflections" piece in *The New Yorker's* issue of November 17, 1980. It took up almost the whole issue. The magazine's editor, William Shawn, had a mostly-positive reputation for trusting his own judgment and not fretting about whether readers would like a piece. His decision to print this one crowned that reputation. Critics, editors, and regular readers all over the English-speaking world scratched their heads—though many were sure they were looking at something important—and asked, "What *is* this?"

Instructions

Read, re-read, and re-re-read, as necessary. Make *your* best effort to understand this essay. When it was new, everyone who read it had to confront it with no help. Do the same. **If you seek or accept help from anyone, or from any source that describes or attempts to explain the piece, you are cheating.** Do look up people, events, and places mentioned, if they're new to you.

The Questions

Question 1 is the biggest and the most obviously necessary, but also the most general, so you may want to save it for last. The thinking you'll do for questions 2 through 5 may be useful prep for answering it.

1. How would you answer someone who saw these pages in your hand and asked, "What's that about?"
2. What do you think is Trow's most damning statement about television?
3. What do you think is Trow's most interesting observation about television? Can you work out what it means?
4. "Pepper" was the protagonist of a popular American television series of the 1970s. You'll probably need to look her up. Try to explain why Trow uses her in his argument. What does she (or the show) represent to him, and how does she (or the show) represent that thing?
5. What do you think is the point of the extended anecdote (or, perhaps more accurately, *series* of anecdotes) about Trow's experience at the New York World's Fair of 1964–1965? Do you see a *most important line* in that thread of the piece—a sentence that seems to hold all of the weight? If so, can you link that to any overall theme or main question of the whole piece—something stated or asked in the opening pages?

The Rumpus Room (optional)

Did this essay exhilarate you? Annoy you? Make you want to dig deeper into something? *How?*