

Building a “Background- Building” Text Set Around a Novel—AI Assisted

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AI prompt callout: Text in red boxes are the prompts that I gave AI—in this case, Chat GPT, although I also use Claude and Google Gemini.

Step 1: What Students Need to Know Before They Read: Identifying Topics

I am a high school English teacher who is teaching *Things Fall Apart*. For many of my students, the contents of this book feels very alien and faraway. What are 5 to 7 topics for short background builders that could support not only their comprehension, ease of reading (many are challenged in reading three and four-syllable words), background knowledge, but, most importantly--engagement and interest.

1. 🔥 What Makes Someone “Strong”? Masculinity Across Cultures

Bridge: Okonkwo’s fear of weakness

Engagement hook: “What would your community call a ‘real man?’”

Students explore:

- How different cultures define strength
- Emotional control vs. vulnerability
- How family expectations shape identity

Vocabulary focus: *masculinity, reputation, status, authority, expectation*

This makes Okonkwo instantly more relatable.

2. 🌐 When Cultures Collide: What Happens When Beliefs Clash?

Bridge: Missionaries and conversion

Hook: “If a new belief system showed up at your school tomorrow, what would happen?”

Students learn:

- What culture includes (religion, law, language, rituals)
- Why people convert to new religions
- Why some resist change

Vocabulary focus: *conversion, tradition, ritual, authority, conflict*

This frames colonialism as a human conflict, not just a historical fact.

3. 👑 Societies Without Kings? How Igbo Governance Worked

Bridge: Igbo political structure

Hook: “Can a society work without a single leader?”

Students explore:

- Council-based decision making
- Titles and earned status
- Community justice systems

Vocabulary focus: *hierarchy, council, deliberation, consensus, governance*

This reduces the “alien” factor and shows Igbo society as organized and complex.

4. 🏛️ Why Do People Join New Religions?

Bridge: Nwoye and early converts

Hook: “Who is most likely to join something new?”

Students examine:

- Social outsiders
- Belonging and identity
- How change can empower marginalized groups

Vocabulary focus: *marginalized, identity, acceptance, belonging*

This supports understanding of why missionaries succeeded.

5. 🌾 Agriculture, Wealth, and Survival: Why Yams Matter

Bridge: Yam farming and masculinity

Hook: “What would count as wealth if money didn’t exist?”

Students learn:

- Subsistence farming
- Status symbols in different cultures
- Risk and survival

Vocabulary focus: *harvest, prosperity, labor, famine, resilience*

Concrete details increase reading ease.

6. 🌐 Colonialism: Who Benefits? Who Loses?

Bridge: British expansion

Hook: “What does it mean to ‘civilize’ someone?”

Students explore:

- Economic motives
- Language and power
- Whose story gets told

Vocabulary focus: *colonialism, empire, exploitation, administration*

This sets up contrast with *Heart of Darkness*.

7. 📖 Whose Story Is Being Told?

Bridge: Achebe vs. Conrad

Hook: “Who gets to describe whom?”

Students examine:

- Representation
- Stereotypes
- Why Achebe wrote back

Vocabulary focus: *perspective, portrayal, narrative, stereotype*

This builds critical thinking and engagement.

Step 2: Choose germane topics from options

Can you write a text set on 2, 3, 5, 6, and 7. Each text should not be more than 325 words. Also don't include too many polysyllabic words (i.e., words with 3+ syllables). And can you generate a sixth text--on the Berlin conference where the European nations "divided" Africa up--and then describe how the British put together a divergent group of cultures to call it Nigeria.

1 When Beliefs Collide: What Happens When

Cultures Meet?

A culture is more than food or dress. It includes religion, laws, family roles, and ideas about right and wrong.

In ***Things Fall Apart***, Igbo culture has clear rules. People honor their gods. They hold festivals. Elders settle disputes. Life has order.

Then British missionaries arrive. They bring a new faith and new rules. They say there is one God. They reject many Igbo customs. They preach that some long-held beliefs are false.

When two belief systems meet, tension can grow. Some people hold tight to old ways. Others are curious. Some feel hurt or angry. Change does not happen all at once. It often starts with small shifts—one person, then a few more.

This kind of clash has happened many times in history. When a new group arrives with strong beliefs, it can divide a community. Families may split. Friends may disagree. What once felt stable can feel unsure.

As you read the novel, ask: Why would some people resist change? Why would others accept it?

How Did Igbo Communities Govern Themselves?

Many students expect every society to have a king or president. Igbo villages did not usually have one ruler. Instead, they were led by councils of elders and titled men.

Men earned titles through work and skill. Age also mattered. Elders were respected for their wisdom. When problems arose, leaders met to talk. They listened to both sides before making a choice.

Religion was part of law. Priests and oracles played roles in major decisions. The goal was not quick action but group agreement.

This system may seem loose at first. But it worked for many villages. It relied on trust, honor, and shared values. People knew the rules and the results of breaking them.

When the British arrived, they expected to work with kings. In Igbo land, there were none. So the British created “warrant chiefs”—men they chose to lead. These chiefs did not always have real support. This change caused anger and confusion.

Understanding Igbo rule helps explain why British control felt so disruptive.

3 Why Do People Join a New Religion?

When the missionaries came, not everyone rejected them. Some Igbo people joined.

Why?

New faith can offer hope. It can offer status. It can offer a place to belong. In Igbo society, some people felt pushed aside. Twins were often left in the forest. Some men never earned titles. Some felt weak in a culture that prized strength.

Christianity said all souls had worth. It offered a fresh start. It gave new names, new songs, and new schools. For some, this was powerful.

Joining a new faith can also be an act of protest. If someone feels hurt by old rules, change can feel freeing.

In the novel, Nwoye is drawn to the new church. He struggles with parts of Igbo life. The new faith speaks to him in ways his old one does not.

Conversion is rarely simple. It is not just belief. It is about identity, family, and hope.

4 Why Do Yams Matter So Much?

In Igbo life, yams are more than food. They are a sign of wealth and strength.

Yams take hard work. The soil must be cleared. The crop must be watched. A poor harvest can mean hunger. A strong harvest brings honor.

A man with many barns full of yams has status. He can support a large family. He can lend seed yams to others. He gains respect.

Today, wealth often means money, cars, or tech. In Okonkwo's world, wealth is land, crops, and family labor.

This helps us understand Okonkwo. He fears failure because failure once marked his father. Success in farming proves he is not weak.

When we see why yams matter, we see why pride, fear, and honor matter too.

5 Colonial Rule: Who Gains? Who Loses?

Colonial rule means one nation takes control of another land and its people.

In the late 1800s, Britain expanded its power in West Africa. British leaders said they brought order and faith. But they also wanted trade and profit.

Palm oil and other goods were valuable. Control meant access to these goods.

Colonial rule changed law, school, and trade. Local leaders lost power. Foreign rules took their place. Some people gained new chances through school or trade. Others lost land, voice, and status.

Colonial rule often creates deep change. It shifts who holds power. It shifts whose beliefs guide daily life.

In ***Things Fall Apart***, the British do not arrive with large armies at first. They come with church and court. But these bring lasting change.

6 The Berlin Conference and the Making of Nigeria

In 1884–85, leaders from Europe met in Berlin, Germany. This meeting is called the Berlin Conference. No African leaders were invited.

European nations drew lines on maps. They divided much of Africa among themselves. The goal was to avoid war between European powers while gaining land and trade.

Britain gained large parts of what is now Nigeria.

In 1914, Britain joined two regions—Northern and Southern Nigeria—into one colony. These regions were very different. In the north, many people were Muslim and lived under emirs. In the west were Yoruba kingdoms. In the east were Igbo villages with no kings but strong councils.

These groups spoke different languages and had different beliefs. Yet Britain ruled them as one unit called Nigeria.

The borders were not based on culture. They were based on European plans.

Nigeria became one nation in 1960, when it gained freedom from Britain. But the mix of many groups in one state has shaped its history ever since.

Step 3: I do considerable editing of the texts

Step 4: Identifying additional content

Can you write a piece contrasting Conrad's book with that of Achebe's

Two Visions of Africa: Conrad and Achebe

In many classrooms, students read *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad alongside *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe. The two books are linked by history, but they tell very different stories.

Conrad's novel follows a European sailor, Marlow, who travels up the Congo River. Africa is shown through his eyes. The land feels dark, vast, and strange. African people are mostly in the background. Few speak. Most are described as groups rather than as individuals. The main focus is on what happens to Europeans when they gain power far from home. Conrad criticizes greed and cruelty in colonial rule, but Africa itself often feels like a setting for a European drama.

Achebe's novel shifts the center of the story. Instead of a European traveler, we follow Okonkwo, an Igbo farmer and leader. The village has laws, rituals, humor, and family life. People argue, celebrate, worry, and hope. Igbo society is shown as complex and organized. When the British arrive, readers see the change from the inside. We feel the tension in families and the strain on old customs.

The contrast is clear. In ***Heart of Darkness***, Africans are mostly silent. In ***Things Fall Apart***, they speak for themselves. Conrad asks what colonial power does to Europeans. Achebe asks what colonial rule does to African communities.

Reading both books together helps students ask a key question: Who gets to tell the story? The answer shapes what we see—and what we fail to see.

OK: My students aren't going to read Heart of Darkness--but I want them to understand the context in which Achebe was publishing a novel in 1958--what had come before in terms of novels about Africa. That is the point here.

Before *Things Fall Apart*: How Africa Was Shown in Earlier European Novels

When **Things Fall Apart** was published in 1958, it was not the first novel set in Africa. For decades, European writers had written books about the continent. But most of those stories were told from a European point of view. In many earlier novels, Africa was shown as wild, dark, and mysterious. The land was described in detail, but African people were often pushed to the edges of the story. They were rarely the main characters. They did not often speak for themselves. Instead, they appeared as background figures in stories about European explorers, traders, or soldiers.

One well-known example is **Heart of Darkness** by **Joseph Conrad**. In that novel, Africa is the setting for a journey made by a European sailor. The focus is on what happens to the European men, not on the inner lives of African people. Africa becomes a stage on which Europeans struggle with greed, fear, and power.

These kinds of books shaped how many readers in Europe and the United States imagined Africa. They often suggested that African societies were simple, chaotic, or without deep structure. Readers rarely saw detailed portrayals of family life, law, religion, or debate within African communities.

By the 1950s, most African countries were still under European rule. African voices were not widely heard in world literature.

Achebe wanted to change that. He once said that until African people told their own stories, others would keep telling them in incomplete ways. **Things Fall Apart** shows Igbo life from the inside — before and during colonial rule. It presents a full society, with strengths, flaws, humor, and conflict.

Understanding this context helps students see that Achebe was not just writing a story. He was entering a conversation — and reshaping it.

Step 5: Locating illustrations/graphics

Illustrations play an important role in helping students engage with texts—at both the elementary and secondary levels. Well-chosen images can spark interest and activate background knowledge, making students more willing to read.

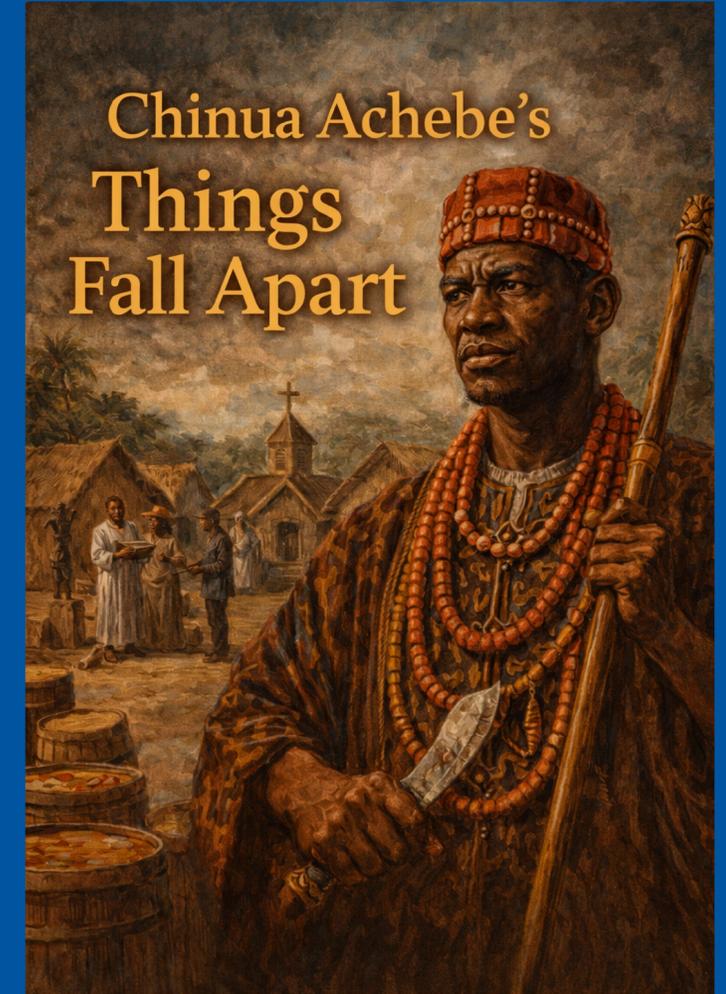
The goal is not to use pictures to help students figure out words, but to support their understanding of the topic and keep them engaged.

At TextProject, we include high-quality illustrations with our texts for this purpose. These images come from a variety of sources. For example, some illustrations—like those in the *Things Fall Apart* Background Builder—are created using AI tools such as ChatGPT (and similar tools like Gemini). We also use images from affordable photo services such as Dreamstime.

Read my blog, “The Power of Pictures: Nurturing Young Readers’ Motivation”

<https://textproject.org/frankly-freddy/the-power-of-pictures-nurturing-young-readers-motivation>

Find the Final Background Builder from this process at <https://textproject.org/free-texts/multi-grade/textmodels>



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