Quoting something out of context can twist its meaning. E.g. Movie Reviews

Real estate agents say there are three top criteria for determining the value of a property: Location, location, and location. Similarly, with biblical interpretation, the three most important criteria for hearing the biblical text accurately and applying it faithfully are context, context, and context.

1. Our context as readers – our world
2. Socio-historical context – a passage’s “social and historical world”
3. Literary context – a passage’s “textual world”

Reading a text in its literary context is how we read virtually every other document we encounter. But it is surprising how often this is not done with the Bible.

1. Why pay attention to literary context?
   a. It helps you avoid interpretive mistakes

   Duvall and Hays suggest that if you read what comes before and after your passage, the surrounding chapters, you will avoid 75% of all interpretive mistakes.

   Example: Revelation 3:20

   b. Context informs and determines meaning

   Literary context helps to provide meaning for individual words.

   Example: 2 Timothy 2:22

   Context also provides meaning for sentences or spoken statements.

   Example: Jeremiah 29:11
c. When we ignore literary context, we can twist Scripture and make it say almost anything

A ridiculous example: Matthew 27:5; Luke 10:37b; John 13:27b
A more serious example: “The Purpose Driven Life”

We need to be very wary of “proof-texting,” that is, where a Bible verse is cited without reference or respect to its context in order to prove a point.

Example: Ephesians 4:15

Please be aware, however, there is nothing necessarily wrong with quoting individual verses in and of itself. As long as we understand them according to their contextual meaning.

2. How should literary context shape the way we read?

a. Read a passage in light of its literary contexts

Every biblical text has multiple contexts.

b. Be careful of relying entirely on chapter, verse and paragraph divisions

Generally speaking these are quite handy, they help us to find passages quickly. We should be aware, however, that they can also hinder our reading of the biblical text. Neither chapter nor verse divisions were not part of the original text. They are not found in the original Greek and Hebrew documents. They were added over a period of about three centuries:

- Modern chapter divisions: English Archbishop Stephen Langton (13th century)
- Modern verse divisions: Robert Stephanus (1550s)

We need to be aware that the placement of these can sometimes be misleading.

Examples: Isaiah 53, 2 Corinthians 2; Genesis 2:1

It is also very important to understand that paragraph divisions and headings are only the interpretive opinions of translators. Headings, in particular, are not always helpful.

Example: Ephesians 5:21-22