1. Chaucer

a) When was Chaucer born, and when did he die?

Geoffrey Chaucer's date of birth is still uncertain, maybe he was born in 1343. He was born in England into an emerging family of well-off London merchants. He received a good education, studying the classics alongside law, theology, astronomy and medicine and managed to hold some relevant positions. After other important posts, he spent his last years in Somersetshire as forest steward of North Petherton Park. In 1399 he returned to London from Somersetshire, where he died the following year and was buried in Westminster Abbey.

Literature wasn't his primary occupation; in fact, he first earned a reputation as a public personality playing different roles as a diplomat, a civil servant and a politician. In 1374 he was appointed Inspector of Customs of the Port of London and in 1386 was elected Member of Parliament for the county of Kent

b) What were his links to royalty?

Even if we do not have a lot of information about him, we know that when he was still a boy, he was a page to Elizabeth of Ulster, King Edward III's daughter-in-law. In 1366 he married Philippa de Roet, John of Gaunt sister-in-law and a distant relative of the king. This episode enabled him to increase and strengthen his regimes with the court and royalty.

from 1374 to 1390, he lived also at the service of three different kings (Edward IV, Richard II and Henry IV) holding some royal posts, which allowed him to have a considerable and high standard of living.

c) What roles did he fulfil in life?

Chaucer had many jobs in his life: a noblewoman's page, an esquire in the royal court, a comptroller of the custom for the Port of London, a clerk of the King's work. In 1559 he joined the army to fight against the French during the Hundred Years' War. Captured in France, he was ransomed by the king himself and employed on several diplomatic missions abroad. In 1374 he was appointed Inspector of Customs of the Port of London and in 1386 was elected Member of Parliament for the county of Kent. In 1388 he made a pilgrimage to Canterbury. After other important posts, including superintendent of the restoration of St George's Chapel in Windsor, he spent his last years in Somersetshire as forest steward of North Petherton Park.

d) What was happening in Europe during his lifetime?

During his lifetime, the most important event that was happening was the Hundred Years' War, which was a series of conflicts in Western Union from 1337 to 1453 between the two House of Plantagenet and the House of Lancaster over the right rule to the kingdom of France. It ended with the Frenches' win. He participated in the Hundred Years' War and was captured by the French.

Also, an epidemic of the Black Death, also known as the Black Death, swept across Europe, killing more than 50 million people, about 60 % of the actual European population.

As a consequence of revolts such as that led by Wat Tyler (1318), the serfdom of the citizens came to an end and a new social class of small farmers was born, called yeomen, who were paid, workers or landowners.

2. The Canterbury Tales

a) What is a frame story (or frame narrative)?

Frame stories, also called frame narratives or sandwich narratives, are literary devices that serve as a story within a story. Usually, the frames stories are told by the protagonist or a supporting character of the main narration who also provides the context and the correct atmosphere to insert a story in. This technique is frequently used either in literature or in cinema and may perform as a device through which the speaking voice informs the audience about aspects of the narrative that may otherwise be hard to understand.

The tool of the frame story is ancient, to give an instance it has been used in Geoffrey Chaucer's Canterbury Tales in the XIV century, where everyone tells a story to the others during a pilgrimage. In this example, but also in modern works such as Inception (2010), the application of this technique may create a parallel story to the main narration.

b) How does this technique of storytelling apply to The Canterbury Tales?

The entire plot of the Canterbury Tales is based on storytelling, during the pilgrimage, they tell each other stories. Therefore the device of frame stories is much used in Geoffrey Chaucer's poem because it represents the story itself. The contest during the journey to Canterbury is about storytelling, rewarding the best who tells the most fascinating story.

3. The Prologue

a) What season is this? What are the clues Chaucer gives us?

Chaucer is alluding to spring and his magnificence. The speaking voice tells spring pushes people to go on pilgrimage because of his terrific beauty, in this particular case the pilgrims want to reach the Monastery of Canterbury to search for Thomas Becket, an Archbishop who was murdered in his Cathedral. After having explained the destination of the pilgrimage, Chaucer tells the starring point of the journey: the Tabard Inn in Southwark.

Moreover, the speaking voice says "my pilgrimage", therefore the reader may understand the speaker participates in the pilgrimage. Since the prologue is written in the first person, the reader recognized the purposes of the speaker: pay homage to the martyr.

b) Look at the differences between modern English and Middle English. Make a note of at least 5 Middle English words, which are spelt differently, but you can still tell what they mean. Make sure to include what you think they mean.

flour: this word probably means “flower”, it is also understandable due to the context;

sweete breethe: the locution may be interpreted as “sweet breath” thanks to the line where is contained;

slepen al the nyght with open ye: the meaning probably is “sleeping all the night with open eyes” referring to birds;

wende: wende is probably a verb because it comes after a subject, it may mean “went” since is quoted as the pilgrimage's destination.