



The Language of Shakespeare

Whether this is your first time reading Shakespeare or you are an experienced student of his work, these tips will help you make sense of the language and read it well, either to yourself or out loud.

Look for Punctuation

Use punctuation marks to tell you when to stop or pause,

not the end of a line. Pause briefly at commas and longer at periods, colons, semicolons, dashes, exclamations, or question marks. To understand Shakespeare better, also **read between the punctuation marks** to group together units of thought.

Let's look at the opening lines from *Midsummer*:

Now, fair Hippolyta, [$\frac{1}{2}$ pause] our nuptial hour
Draws on apace; [pause] four happy days bring in
Another moon; [pause] but, O, methinks, [$\frac{1}{2}$ pause] how slow
This old moon wanes! [pause] She lingers my desires, [$\frac{1}{2}$ pause]
Like to a step-dame or a dowager
Long withering out a young man's revenue. [pause]

Read Between the Lines

Sometimes Shakespeare will **skip a word or two**, assuming you know what goes there.

It's called an ellipsis. Let's use examples from Act One of the play again:

"She lingers my desires"

Expanded: "She lingers [the fulfillment of] my desires."

"Four happy days bring in another moon"

Expanded: "Four happy days [will pass and] bring in another moon."



Who Does What?

Keep track of the simple ideas inside the complex ones. In our example from the top of the page:

SUBJECT: the old moon

VERB: lingers

OBJECT: my desires

Now put it all together in your own words: "Theseus is impatient because time feels slow when he's waiting to get married."

Swallowing Syllables

Sometimes Shakespeare will swallow a syllable to keep the rhythm of his words flowing. He makes a contraction out of a word, like we do for isn't (is not) can't (can not) or it'll (it will).

Here are two examples from Act One: "**O'er**" = **over**: "Theseus. O'er a barren promontory..." "**Ne'er**" = **never**: "Ne'er could the strumpet wind!"

In Shakespeare, don't be confused when you see words like ta'en (taken), 'tis (it is), e'en (even), and ne'er (never). He's cutting two syllables down to one. It's pretty easy to figure out what syllables he's cutting to keep his rhythm flowing.

Word Order

Look for sentences where the **word order is flipped**, or inverted. Soon after the lines above, Hermia's father says:
"Full of vexation come I..."
Vexation is anger and frustration, but we would normally say:
"I come full of vexation."
Later, Hermia says, "So will I grow..."
We usually say, "So I will grow."

Shakespeare often rearranged word order for poetic power.

Figurative Language

Watch for Shakespeare's **metaphors, similes, symbolism, personification, and other figurative language**. He really packs a lot of meaning into his comparisons, so use your imagination to understand why. Let's consider our lines again, but this time, notice the figurative language. Theseus says,

*Now, fair Hippolyta, our nuptial hour
Draws on apace; four happy days bring in
Another moon; but, O, methinks, how slow
This old moon wanes! She lingers my desires,
Like to a step-dame or a dowager
Long withering out a young man's revenue.*

This passage is packed with metaphor and personification. Theseus can't wait to marry Hippolyta, but he's growing impatient, even though they are "happy days." The **moon** is personified as an old woman who "lingers" and is too "slow." His nuptial (wedding) hour is four days away, and time is compared to a **stepmother** (dame) or **widow** (dowager) who slowly drains a young man's inheritance. Theseus is basically saying: "Time is dragging along like a greedy stepmom who won't let me have my allowance." Instead of simply saying "time is passing too slowly."

This creativity is one of the reasons why he is so famous as a writer.

Wordplay and "Old School" Words

Shakespeare loved puns and wordplay. When Hermia and Lysander are lost in the woods, he tries to lie down too close to her. She says:

HERMIA Nay, good Lysander; for my sake, my dear,
Lie further off yet, do not lie so near.

LYSANDER (after telling her his love is truth, not a lie)
Then by your side no bed-room me deny;
For lying so, Hermia, I do not lie.

Do you notice that lie means to recline, or lie down, but also to tell a lie? This is called a pun.

Simple words like thee, thou, thy, and thine are still understandable. But here's a quick list of commonly used words in Shakespeare that we no longer use very often.

anon—right now, soon.... "Anon, sweet Hermia; I come right away."
art—are, OR skill..... "Thou art dead; no physician's art can save you.."
dost or doth—does or do..... "Dost thou mock me still with vows?"
ere—before..... "Ere morning breaks, our fates are sealed."
fain—gladly..... "I would fain sleep, but love keeps watch."
fie—exclamation of dismay or disgust..... "Fie, Lysander! Is this thy courtesy?"
hark—listen..... "Hark to the owl," OR "Hark! The herald angels sing!"
hence—away..... "Get thee hence, and trouble me no more!"
hie—hurry..... "Hie thee away, for day draws near."
hither—here..... "Come hither, fairy, and attend me."
thither—there..... "Follow me thither, where moonlight falls."
Hath—has... "Love hath turned reason into folly."

Feel the Rhythm

Let's read a line from the opening again, thinking about syllables:
"This old moon wanes! She ling-ers my de-sires"

Now say it with added emphasis, or stress, on the rhythm:
"This OLD moon WANES! She LINGers MY deSIREs."

Do you hear the rhythm of an alternating stress? Do you notice there are ten syllables in the line? This is **iambic Pentameter**. For an excellent video on the subject, go to YouTube and search "Why Shakespeare loved iambic pentameter - David T. Freeman and Gregory Taylor." As you read Shakespeare, try to hear the rhythm, especially in his powerful speeches. He will often shift gears from prose (normal speech) to poetic verse, and almost the whole play *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is in verse.

Read these lines from *Midsummer* now:

IF we SHADows HAVE offENded
THINK but THIS and ALL is MENded

Do you hear the syllable emphasis change? The stress is on the first syllable, and there are eight syllables per line instead of the usual ten.

Having an awareness of rhythm will help you appreciate the poetry in the lines.



ho—hey (roughly equivalent). *“Ho! Who calls upon me in this place?”*
knave - a low and dishonest person.... *“Peace, thou knave; thou wrong'st me much.”*
mark—pay attention to... *“Mark me well: I am not what I was.”*
marry—indeed..... *“Marry, I swear it by the pale moon's light.”*
pray/prithee—a polite way of asking something... *“Prithee, torment me not with questions.”*
saucy—cheeky; sassy..... *“Hence, thou saucy sprite!”*
sirrah—a term of address used for servants..... *“Sirrah, fetch me flowers fit for Titania.”*
whence—from where..... *“Whence comes this madness of the night?”*
wherefore—why..... *“Wherefore dost thou hate me so?”*

Practice: apply what you have learned to the following famous lines from *Midsummer*.

1. Theseus on imagination (Act 5, Scene 1)

*“The lunatic, the lover, and the poet
 Are of imagination all compact:
 One sees more devils than vast hell can hold;
 That is the madman: the lover, all as frantic,
 Sees Helen's beauty in a brow of Egypt:
 The poet's eye, in a fine frenzy rolling,
 Doth glance from heaven to earth, from earth to heaven;
 And as imagination bodies forth
 The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
 Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
 A local habitation and a name.”*

2. Puck on love's confusion (Act 3, Scene 2)

*“Lord, what fools these mortals be!
 For now I see this hath a strange effect:
 Fie on her virtue! courage and constancy!
 And virtue is a falsehood, and jealousy
 A monster bred and born of self-same vice.
 And now both rivals, to mock their own eyes,
 Gaze on one another; therefore let them fight.”*

3. Helena on love's blindness (Act 1, Scene 1)

*“Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind;
 And therefore is wing'd Cupid painted blind:
 Nor hath Love's mind of any judgement taste;
 Wings and no eyes figure unheedy haste:
 And therefore is Love said to be a child,
 Because in choice he is so oft beguiled.”*

4. Oberon on the magic flower (Act 2, Scene 1)

*“Yet mark'd I where the bolt of Cupid fell:
 It fell upon a little western flower,
 Before milk-white, now purple with love's wound,
 And maidens call it love-in-idleness.
 Fetch me that flower; the herb I show'd thee once:
 The juice of it on sleeping eyelids laid
 Will make or man or woman madly dote
 Upon the next live creature that it sees.”*

5. Lysander on reason and love (Act 1, Scene 1)

*“The course of true love never did run smooth;
 But either it was different in blood,—
 Too high to be enthral'd to low;
 Or else misgraffed in respect of years,—
 Too old to be engaged to young;
 Or else it stood upon the choice of friends,—
 Too full of self-interest.”*

6. Titania's fairy-world speech (Act 2, Scene 1)

*“These are the forgeries of jealousy:
 And never, since the middle summer's spring,
 Met we on hill, in dale, forest, or mead,
 By paved fountain, or by rushy brook,
 Or in the beached margent of the sea,
 To dance our ringlets to the whistling wind,
 But with thy brawls thou hast disturb'd our sport.”*

7. Bottom transformed (Act 3, Scene 1)

*“I see their knavery: this is to make an ass of me;
 To fright me, if they could. But I will not stir from this
 place,
 Do what they can: I will walk up and down here,
 And I will sing, that they shall hear I am not afraid.”*

8. Puck's epilogue (Act 5, Scene 1)

*“If we shadows have offended,
 Think but this, and all is mended,
 That you have but slumber'd here
 While these visions did appear.
 And this weak and idle theme,
 No more yielding but a dream,
 Gentles, do not reprehend.”*

Did Shakespeare really write Shakespeare?

A growing number of people are starting to question the idea that Shakespeare was really the actor from Stratford, and that the true writer might be the Earl of Oxford, using a pen name. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* doesn't prove Oxfordian authorship, but several elements align naturally with Oxford's life and experience. The play is deeply rooted in court culture—noble marriages, authority, patronage, and elite leisure—an environment Oxford knew intimately as a lifelong courtier. Its portrayal of amateur performers nervously staging a play for nobles reflects insider knowledge of court entertainments, something Oxford directly participated in as a patron of acting companies. The play's strong grounding in classical mythology and Ovid also matches Oxford's humanist education and known literary interests. Finally, its fascination with disguise, performance, and shifting identity resonates with the realities of court life, where social roles were carefully managed—making the play a comfortable fit with Oxford's biography, even if it does not constitute proof.

Shakespeare or Shakspeare?

Many people assume that William Shakspeare (note the spelling) of Stratford-upon-Avon was the famous writer we call Shakespeare. But when we look closely at the evidence from his lifetime, there is no record of him claiming to be the author of the plays and poems. The main evidence linking him to the works comes from the *First Folio*, a collection of Shakespeare's plays published in 1623, seven years after Mr. Shakspeare of Stratford died.

There are four main reasons usually given to support the idea that Mr. Shakspeare of Stratford was the author:

1. The name "William Shakespeare" appeared on many published plays and poems during his lifetime.
2. Writers like Ben Jonson and Leonard Digges praised "Shakespeare" in the *First Folio* and referred to his connection with Stratford.
3. Two actors, John Heminges and Henry Condell—mentioned in Shakspeare's Stratford will—called him the author in the *Folio*.
4. His monument in Stratford shows a man with a pen and paper, suggesting he was a writer.

But each of these points has problems:

- The spelling of the name "Shakespeare" on the title pages was nearly always the same, often with a hyphen ("Shake-speare"), which was rare for names. Meanwhile, Shakspeare's own name was spelled several different ways in official records, including "Shakspeare" and "Shackspeare," and never with an e after the k. The spelling differences raise the question: was the printed name referring to the same person?
- Ben Jonson and Leonard Digges only praised "Shakespeare" after Mr. Shakspeare died. They never gave personal details about the man, like his family, education, or even when he lived. Their words praised the works, not the person. Ben Jonson didn't even mention Shakespeare until the year of Shakspeare's death, and only then as an actor.
- Heminges and Condell are often seen as strong witnesses, but there are doubts about whether they actually wrote the *First Folio* introductions. Some scholars believe those

passages were written by someone else as marketing. Why, skeptics ask, did nobody praise or memorialize "Shakespeare" for seven years after his death?

- The monument in Stratford now shows a man with a pen and paper, but an earlier sketch from 1634 shows him holding a sack, not writing tools. Records also say the monument was "repaired," suggesting it may have been changed later to make it look more like a writer's memorial. The inscription on the monument never clearly says that Mr. Shakspeare was the famous author. It doesn't mention plays, poetry, or acting at all.

The Missing Evidence

If Mr. Shakspeare really was the author, we would expect to find some evidence: a letter, a manuscript, a reference to him as a writer from someone who knew him. But we don't. Not a single play, poem, or personal letter written by him has ever been found after great searching. The only surviving examples of his handwriting are six shaky signatures on legal papers, including his will. These suggest he may have struggled even to sign his name. Some experts think even these signatures may have been written by someone else.

We do have evidence that he was a father, a husband, a property owner, a money lender, an actor, a person who liked to sue others in court, a theater shareholder, and even a tax cheat. But unlike all the other, lesser known writers of his time, we have no evidence of Shakspeare the author.

His will contains no mention of books, papers, or anything literary. It famously leaves his wife his "second best bed," but it says nothing about his work as a writer, despite being long and detailed. He left small gifts to three actors (written in as an afterthought), but not to any writers or printers—not even to Richard Field, the Stratford-born printer who published the poems that first made the name "Shakespeare" famous.



A Life That Doesn't Match the Works

Mr. Shakspeare grew up in a small, farming town, and there's no record of him traveling outside of England. His parents were illiterate, and neither of his daughters could write. He may have attended the local grammar school, but we don't know for sure. He didn't go to college, and no records show how he could have gained the deep knowledge found in the works.

The plays and poems reveal expertise in many areas—law, music, history, medicine, foreign languages, royal court life, and much more. The works refer to things that were mostly known only by the educated upper classes, and many of the books and sources used hadn't been translated into English at the time. How could someone with Mr. Shakspeare's background have accessed all this knowledge?

The first 28 years of his life are almost a total blank, often called the "lost years." No one knows how he became connected to theater or

how he learned to write. Some say he was just a genius, but even geniuses need education and access to books. There's no evidence that Mr. Shakspere owned a library, or that he borrowed books from one. He also never published any poetry or plays under his own name during his lifetime, and no payments for writing can be traced to him.

Silence from His Own Time

Shakespeare's works were performed for royalty and played an important role in English culture. Yet there's no record that Queen Elizabeth I or King James I ever met or even mentioned Mr. Shakspere. When Elizabeth died, Shakespeare—unlike other writers of the time—wrote no tribute. Even when one of his plays was linked to a rebellion, no one asked him about it. If he was so important, why was he invisible?

Even stranger, when he died in 1616, no one in the literary world seemed to notice. No tributes, no letters, no public mourning. His name wasn't mentioned in connection with his death. Even his actor friends—those mentioned in his will—did not comment. This silence seems hard to explain if he truly was the greatest writer in English history.

Shakspere lived another five years after he supposedly stopped writing. But there's no sign he wrote again. He didn't put on plays in his hometown or leave behind any evidence that the people around him knew him as a poet or playwright. In fact, quite a few people who knew him personally never referred to him in their writing as an author. His own son-in-law, Dr. John Hall, kept a detailed diary and mentioned other local poets, but never wrote that his own wife's father was the greatest writer of them all. Perhaps because he wasn't?

A Mystery That Endures

Nothing in Mr. Shakspere's life clearly connects him to the works of Shakespeare. The plays focus almost entirely on nobility, foreign lands, and experiences far removed from the life of a small-town businessman or a London actor, money lender, and theater manager. They show no trace of his hometown or personal life—not even the death of his young son.

Some inconsistencies could be explained away, but there are simply too many. Even respected Shakespeare biographer Samuel Schoenbaum admitted that the gap between the beauty of the works and the plainness of the records about the man is “vertiginous.”

The famous scholar Hugh Trevor-Roper wrote that despite centuries of research, Shakespeare “still remains so close to a mystery that even his identity can still be doubted.”

Many brilliant people, like Mark Twain, Walt Whitman, Sigmund Freud, Henry James, Ralph Waldo Emerson and three Supreme Court justices have said the Stratford biography is doubtful, or that someone else wrote the works. It's not unreasonable to question whether the man from Stratford really wrote the plays and poems of Shakespeare. In fact, what seems unreasonable is pretending there's no doubt at all.

Adopted from “The Declaration of Reasonable Doubt” at <https://doubtaboutwill.org/>.



The case for Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford, as the true author behind the works of William Shakespeare centers on his exceptional education, literary background, and courtly experience—qualities that seem far beyond what the historical William Shakspere, the actor from Stratford had. De Vere was a well-traveled nobleman fluent in multiple languages, with intimate knowledge of court politics, law, classical literature, and foreign cultures—areas that are richly reflected in the plays and poems attributed to Shakespeare. Many Shakespearean works seem to show firsthand knowledge of aristocratic life, as well as detailed familiarity with places in Italy and France that de Vere visited for more than a year but the Stratford man did not. Some people believe that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* takes place in Sabbioneta, Italy, known as “Little Athens,” which has a passageway called “The Duke's Oak.”

The public use of a commoner's name, Shakespeare, may have served as a pen name to allow de Vere to write for the public stage, something considered inappropriate for a nobleman of his rank. There are many autobiographical parallels between de Vere's life and themes or characters in the plays. There are also stunning parallels between the life of de Vere and specific details mentioned in Shakespeare's Sonnets. Although de Vere died in 1604, and some Shakespeare works were published after that, the plays and poems were likely already complete by then.

Oxford was known in his time as a talented writer. He was praised as a fine poet and playwright, among the “best for comedy,” as Francis Meres described him in 1598. *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589), which was the most important book of literary criticism in that period, named Oxford as “first” among courtiers “who have written excellently well, as it would appear if their doings could be found out and made public with the rest.” This means people believed he was a great writer, even though most of his work wasn't published under his own name. The book concluded that writers like Oxford, who were Earls, “...suffered it to be published without their own names to it.”

There is no single piece of evidence that is absolutely convincing as to whether the Stratford man or Oxford wrote the works of Shakespeare - that is why it is so debated today.

Lesson Plan: Understanding Shakespeare's Language

- **LEARNING OBJECTIVE:**

Students will be able to analyze Shakespeare's use of language, including punctuation, word order, and figurative language, to enhance their understanding of his plays.

- **POSSIBLE ASSESSMENTS:**

Students may complete a short essay analyzing a selected passage from *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, focusing on the use of language techniques discussed on the handout. Or they may work with a partner and give a brief presentation where they read lines from the play as outlined, then explain examples of the language techniques. Students may also write a brief original dialogue using some of the language techniques, incorporating "Old School" words from the handout. Students could also discuss or write a summary of the authorship question.

- **KEY POINTS:**

Punctuation: Understanding how Shakespeare uses punctuation to indicate pauses and emphasize meaning.

Word Order: Identifying inverted sentences and their poetic significance.

Figurative Language: Recognizing metaphors, similes, and symbolism to derive deeper meanings.

Rhythm and Meter: Exploring iambic pentameter and its impact on the text's flow and emotional weight.

Ellipsis and Wordplay: Analyzing the use of ellipsis and puns in Shakespeare's dialogue.

- **OPENING:**

Facilitate a brief discussion to gauge prior knowledge and interest. "Why is Shakespeare's language considered hard? Is it difficult to understand? What are some techniques to make it easier to understand?"

- **INTRODUCTION TO NEW MATERIAL:**

Use the class handout to present key points, and possibly move through interactive reading of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* passages.

Utilize visual aids to highlight punctuation and word order.

Anticipate the misconception that Shakespeare's language is too archaic to be understood; emphasize that it can be deconstructed for clarity.

- **GUIDED PRACTICE:**

In pairs, students will read a passage and identify examples of punctuation and figurative language. Almost any page of the play will work well; famous passages could help give the students more footing: there are 10 provided after this lesson plan.

Scaffold questioning: Start with identifying punctuation, then move to word order, and finally discuss the implications of figurative language.

Circulate to monitor student engagement and understanding, providing support as needed.

Expect students to use specific examples from the text and articulate their interpretations clearly.

- **CLOSING:**

Conduct a quick "exit ticket" where students write one new thing they learned about Shakespeare's language and one question they still have.

- **EXTENSION ACTIVITY:**

For students who finish early, provide a list of additional passages from Shakespeare's works to analyze using the same techniques, encouraging deeper exploration.

Standards Aligned, Grades 9-12

GRADE 9 STANDARDS ALIGNED:

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.4: Analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.5: Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure a text contribute to its overall meaning.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.10: By the end of grade 9, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, at the high end of the grades 9-10 text complexity band independently and proficiently.

GRADE 10 - CVCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1: Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.4: Analyze the cumulative impact of specific word choices on meaning and tone, including words with multiple meanings or language that is particularly fresh or engaging.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.5: Analyze how an author's choices concerning how to structure a text contribute to its overall meaning.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.10: By the end of grade 10, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, at the high end of the grades 9-10 text complexity band independently and proficiently.

GRADE 11 - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.1: Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.4: Analyze the impact of the author's choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.5: Analyze how an author's choices concerning the structure of a text contribute to its meaning.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.10: By the end of grade 11, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, at the high end of the grades 11-12 text complexity band independently and proficiently.

GRADE 12 - CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.1: Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.2: Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.4: Analyze the impact of the author's choices regarding how to develop and relate elements of a story or drama.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.11-12.10: By the end of grade 12, read and comprehend literature, including stories, dramas, and poems, at the high end of the grades 11-12 text complexity band independently and proficiently.