

## Lesson Plan: The Shakespeare Authorship Trial

**Grade Level:** 9–12

**Time Required:** 5–7 class periods (depending on research time and trial length)

**Unit Focus:** Shakespeare, Literary Authorship, Argumentation, Critical Thinking, Research

**Essential Question:** If writing the works of Shakespeare were a crime, who would be “guilty” of authorship—William of Stratford or Edward de Vere, 17th Earl of Oxford?

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### Learning Objectives:

Students will:

- Conduct structured literary-historical research using primary and secondary sources.
  - Analyze, interpret, and organize evidence to support an argumentative claim.
  - Collaborate in teams to develop persuasive legal-style presentations.
  - Evaluate opposing viewpoints and prepare rebuttals.
  - Participate in a mock trial that reinforces speaking, listening, and reasoning skills.
  - Write an individual summary verdict that articulates and justifies their final opinion.
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### Materials:

- Teacher-curated Research Component (including Stratfordian and Oxfordian sources)  
see: lesson plan resources
  - Access to online research tools or library materials
  - Printed handouts for trial roles, evidence planning, and rubrics
  - Timer, optional courtroom props, as available
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### Lesson Overview:

## Day 1 – Introduction & Group Division

- Introduce the Shakespeare Authorship Question.
- Present the framing question: *If writing Shakespeare's works were a crime, who is guilty?*
- Divide class into **4 teams**:
  - **Prosecution A**: Argues William of Stratford *was* the author.
  - **Defense A**: Argues William of Stratford *was not* the author.
  - **Prosecution B**: Argues Edward de Vere *was* the author.
  - **Defense B**: Argues Edward de Vere *was not* the author.

## Day 2 – Initial Research & Discovery

- Students use teacher-provided sources to research:
  - Biographies, historical context, authorship evidence, counter-arguments.
- Teams draft **bullet point lists of talking points**.
- Begin preparing **opening statements** and **case outlines**.
- **Discovery Process**: Teams share key evidence with their opposing sides.

## Day 3 – Rebuttal Research

- Based on discovery, teams conduct a second round of research to prepare **rebuttals**, **cross-examination questions**, and **closing statement ideas**.

## Day 4 & 5 – Trial Phase One: William of Stratford

**Prompt:** *Is William of Stratford guilty of being the author of Shakespeare's works?*

- Opening Statements – 2 minutes each
- Prosecution A presents case – 10 minutes

- Pause (3 minutes)
- Defense A cross-examines – 5 minutes
- Defense A presents case – 10 minutes
- Pause (3 minutes)
- Prosecution A cross-examines – 5 minutes
- Closing Statements – 2–3 minutes each

### **Day 6 – Trial Phase Two: Edward de Vere**

**Prompt:** *Is Edward de Vere guilty of being the author of Shakespeare's works?*

- Same structure as Day 4, with Prosecution B and Defense B

### **Day 7 – Verdict & Written Reflection**

- Students instructed to remain impartial.
- Class votes:
  - Is William of Stratford guilty of authorship?
  - Is Edward de Vere, Earl of Oxford, guilty of authorship?
- Students write **individual summary verdicts** answering:
  - What were the strongest points in each case?
  - Which author do you believe most likely wrote the works and why?
  - How did your thinking change (if at all) during the trial?

### **Rubric for The Shakespeare Authorship Trial**

Criteria	A (Excellent)	B (Good)	C (Satisfactory)	D (Needs Improvement)	F (Unsatisfactory)
<b>Research Quality &amp; Use of Sources</b>	Thorough, accurate use of multiple primary and secondary sources; demonstrates deep understanding of historical context.	Good use of primary and secondary sources with minor inaccuracies; shows clear understanding of context.	Adequate use of sources with some inaccuracies or limited variety; basic understanding demonstrated.	Limited or inaccurate use of sources; superficial or unclear understanding of context.	Minimal or no use of sources; lacks understanding of historical context.
<b>Argument Development &amp; Evidence</b>	Arguments are well-organized, persuasive, and supported by strong, relevant evidence; addresses counter-arguments effectively.	Arguments are clear and mostly supported by relevant evidence; some counter-arguments addressed.	Arguments are somewhat organized but may lack clear support or insufficient counter-argument consideration.	Arguments are poorly organized or weakly supported; counter-arguments largely ignored.	Arguments are unclear, unsupported, or missing; no consideration of counter-arguments.
<b>Collaboration &amp; Teamwork</b>	Actively contributes, communicates effectively, and supports team members; helps create a cohesive presentation.	Participates well and communicates with team; minor issues with collaboration.	Participates but with limited input or occasional communication issues.	Rarely participates or communicates; hinders team progress.	Does not participate or collaborate with the team.
<b>Trial Participation (Speaking &amp; Listening)</b>	Speaks confidently, clearly, and persuasively; listens attentively and responds thoughtfully during trial phases.	Speaks clearly with minor lapses; listens and responds appropriately most of the time.	Speaks with some hesitation or unclear points; listens but may miss some key points.	Speaks unclearly or too briefly; poor listening and minimal response to others.	Does not participate in speaking or listening components.

<b>Written Summary Verdict</b>	Insightful, well-written summary that clearly justifies opinion with strong reference to trial evidence and reasoning.	Clear and well-organized summary with good justification and references to evidence.	Summary is satisfactory but may lack depth or detailed justification.	Summary is incomplete, unclear, or weakly justified.	Summary is missing, off-topic, or shows no understanding of the trial or evidence.
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