



## The Language of Shakespeare

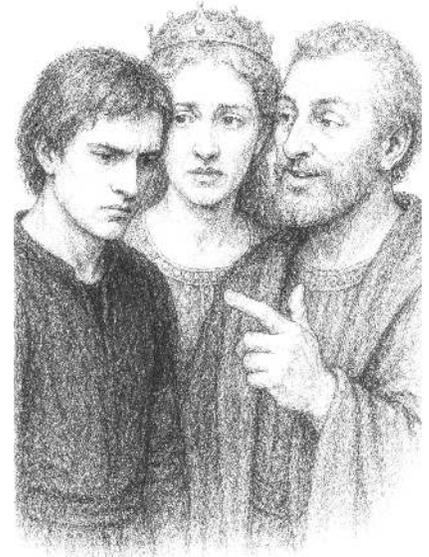
Whether this is your first time reading Shakespeare or you are an experienced student of his work, these tips will help you make sense of the language and read it well, either to yourself or out loud.

### 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.

Example from *Hamlet*:

KING How is it that the clouds still hang on you? **[pause]**  
HAMLET Not so, [ $\frac{1}{2}$  **pause**] my lord; **[pause]** I am too much in the sun.**[pause]**  
QUEEN Good Hamlet, [ $\frac{1}{2}$  **pause**] cast thy nighted color off, [ $\frac{1}{2}$  **pause**]  
And let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark. **[pause]**  
Do not forever with thy veiled lids  
Seek for thy noble father in the dust. **[pause]**  
Thou know'st 'tis common; **[pause]** all that lives must die, [ $\frac{1}{2}$  **pause**]  
Passing through nature to eternity.



### Word Order

Look for sentences where the word order is flipped, or inverted. In the play, Polonius says, "mad call I it." Usually, we would say "I call it mad." Horatio, describing the ghost, says, "But answer made it none..." We would usually say, "It made no answer." Shakespeare often rearranged sentences for poetic power.

### 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 one of the most famous examples from the play:

"To be or not to be: that is the question."

To be or not to be what? The reader must provide the missing ideas. To be alive or not to be alive; to exist or not to exist, to live or not to live? By giving room for the reader to provide the missing words, Shakespeare urges us to think.

### Who Does What?

Keep track of the simple ideas inside the complex ones. In the example at the top: "Good Hamlet, cast thy nighted color off..."

SUBJECT: Hamlet  
VERB: cast (throw off)  
OBJECT: thy nighted color (your black clothes)

Hamlet's mother, Gertrude, thinks it's time for him to stop mourning his dead father and wearing black clothes. If you keep track of the subject and verb it helps to figure out the meaning.

## 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). Do you see he did this in our example with the line, "Thou know'st 'tis common?" Both Know'st (knowest) and 'tis (it is) are contractions. In modern English it would be "You know that it is common."

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.

## Figurative Language

Watch how Shakespeare uses **figurative language**—like **metaphors**, **similes**, **symbols**, and **personification**—to add deeper meaning to what his characters say. He often says one thing but means something much more powerful, so try to picture what the comparisons really mean. Let's look at these lines again and notice how the language works:



**"Good Hamlet, cast thy nighted color off"**

*(metaphor: "nighted color" means dark clothing—like the color of night)*

**"And let thine eye look like a friend on Denmark."**

*(figurative language: it's not just about his eyes—she's telling him to show kindness to the king, who is now "Denmark")*

**"Do not forever with thy vailed lids..."**

*(figurative: his eyelids are lowered in grief; she's saying not to keep his eyes down forever)  
(hyperbole: "forever" is an exaggeration—she doesn't really mean for eternity)*

**"Seek for thy noble father in the dust."**

*(symbolism: "dust" represents death or the grave—she's telling him to stop mourning his father)*

Shakespeare uses this kind of figurative language not only to say more with fewer words but also to make his writing sound beautiful and emotional. This poetic style is one reason why his work is still famous and respected today.

## Feel the Rhythm

Feel the rhythm. Read that last line (above) again, thinking about syllables: "Seek-for-thy-no-ble-fa-ther-in-the-dust."  
Now say it with added emphasis, or stress, on the rhythm: **"Seek-FOR-thy-NO-ble-FA-ther-IN-the-DUST."**

Notice that the line has ten syllables with an alternating stress? 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 shift gears from prose (normal speech) to verse. Having an awareness of rhythm will help you appreciate the poetry in the lines.

## Wordplay and "Old School" Words

Shakespeare loved **puns**—clever jokes that use words with more than one meaning. Even during serious or intense scenes, he liked to sneak in a little wordplay. Here's our example again:

**KING:** How is it that the clouds still hang on you?

**HAMLET:** Not so, my lord; I am too much in the sun.

The King is asking Hamlet why he still seems so gloomy or sad—like he has a cloud over his head. But Hamlet answers with a pun. He says he's "too much in the sun." That sounds like he means sunlight, but he's also making a joke about being called "son." Even though the King is now Hamlet's stepfather (after marrying Hamlet's mother), Hamlet doesn't want to be treated like his son, so he hides his anger in a double meaning.

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, OR “I come right away”……. “*Anon, good nurse!*”  
**art**—are, OR skill……. “*Thou art dead; no physician’s art can save you..*”  
**dost or doth**—does or do……. “*Dost thou know the time?*”  
**ere**—before……. “*We must leave ere daybreak.*”  
**fain**—gladly……. “*I would fain speak to you about it.*”  
**fie**—exclamation of dismay or disgust. “*You cheated? Fie upon it!*” OR “*Fie! Are you mad?*”  
**hark**—listen……. “*Hark to the owl,*” OR “*Hark! The herald angels sing!*”  
**hence**—away……. “*Get thee hence, beggar!*” OR “*We must hence before the army arrives.*”  
**hie**—hurry……. “*Hie thee hence, or lose your life!*”  
**hither**—here……. “*Come hither, young lad.*”  
**thither**—there……. “*Look to the east—thither doth the sun arise.*”  
**hath**—has……. “*He hath killed many a man.*” OR “*He hath a horse.*”  
**ho**—hey (roughly equivalent). “*O villany! Ho! let the door be lock’d!*”  
**knave** - a low and dishonest person……. “*There’s ne’er a villain…but he’s an arrant knave.*”  
**mark**—pay attention to……. “*Mark my words.*”  
**marry**—indeed……. “*Aye, marry, is’t,*” means “yes, indeed it is.”  
**pray/prithee**—a polite way of asking something……. “*I prithee answer the question.*”  
**saucy**—cheeky; sassy……. “*Hence, thou saucy boy!*”  
**sirrah**—a term of address used for servants……. “*Sirrah, bring the letter over here.*”  
**whence**—from where……. “*Whence is that knocking?*”  
**wherefore**—why……. “*but wherefore I know not,*” means “I don’t know why.”

## Practice Verses - apply what you’ve learned to understanding the following famous lines:

1. To be, or not to be: that is the question:

Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,  
And by opposing end them? To die—to sleep,  
No more; and by a sleep to say we end  
The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks  
That flesh is heir to: 'tis a consummation  
Devoutly to be wish'd.

2. O, what a rogue and peasant slave am I!

Is it not monstrous that this player here, But in a fiction, in a dream of passion,  
Could force his soul so to his own conceit  
That from her working all his visage wann'd,  
Tears in his eyes, distraction in his aspect,  
A broken voice, and his whole function suiting  
With forms to his conceit?

3. O, that this too too solid flesh would melt,

Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew!  
Or that the Everlasting had not fix'd  
His canon 'gainst self-slaughter! O God! God!  
How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable  
Seem to me all the uses of this world!

4. Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you,

trippingly on the tongue: but if you mouth it,  
as many of your players do, I had as lief the  
town-crier spoke my lines. Nor do not saw the air  
too much with your hand, thus, but use all gently;  
for in the very torrent, tempest, and, as I may say,  
whirlwind of your passion, you must acquire and beget  
a temperance that may give it smoothness.

5. What a piece of work is man! how noble in reason!

how infinite in faculty! in form and moving how  
express and admirable! in action how like an angel!  
in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the  
world! the paragon of animals! And yet, to me,  
what is this quintessence of dust?

6. Not a whit, we defy augury: there is a special

providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now,  
'tis not to come; if it be not to come, it will be now;  
if it be not now, yet it will come: the readiness is all:  
since no man has aught of what he leaves, what is't to leave betimes?

7. Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio: a fellow

of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy: he hath  
borne me on his back a thousand times; and now, how  
abhorred in my imagination it is! my gorge rises at it.  
Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft.

8. Get thee to a nunnery: why wouldst thou be a breeder

of sinners? I am myself indifferent honest; but yet I  
could accuse me of such things that it were better  
my mother had not borne me. I am very proud, revengeful,  
ambitious, with more offences at my beck than I have  
thoughts to put them in, imagination to give them shape,  
or time to act them in.

9. Something is rotten in the state of Denmark.

Heaven will direct it. Nay, let's follow him.  
Though it tempt you toward the flood, my lord,  
Or to the dreadful summit of the cliff  
That beetles o'er his base into the sea...

10. The lady doth protest too much, methinks.

O, but she'll keep her word. Have you heard the argument?  
Is there no offence in't? No, no, they do but jest, poison  
in jest; no offence i' the world



## A last thought: 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. In *Hamlet*, there are so many parallels between the life of the Earl of Oxford and the character of Hamlet that some even see the play as partly autobiographical. Here are some interesting ones:

- Oxford's father died when he was 12; his mother remarried within 15 months. In *Hamlet*, the prince's father is murdered and his mother quickly marries Claudius.
- Oxford became a royal ward under the control of William Cecil (Lord Burghley) after his father died—just as Hamlet is spied on by Polonius. Some historians have believed for a long time that Polonius is modeled on Burghley.
- Oxford had a stormy marriage with Anne Cecil, the daughter of Lord Burghley, which is similar to Hamlet's relationship with Ophelia. Polonius also spies on his son in France, just as Lord Burghley did to his own son.
- Hamlet confides in Horatio, and Oxford's closest confidant was his cousin Horace Vere—often referred to as "Horatio."
- Peregrine Bertie (Oxford's brother in law) served as a royal emissary to the Danish court at Elsinore. He mingled with Danish nobles, recording courtly rituals that appear in *Hamlet* and breaking bread with men named Rosenkrantz and Guildenstern, who also appear in the play.
- Both Oxford and Hamlet were captured by pirates at sea. Hamlet recounts the pirate attack in Act IV, Scene vi, and Oxford was also seized, stripped of belongings and abandoned by pirates.
- Oxford stabbed and killed a servant (possibly a spy) of Burghley. In the play, Hamlet impulsively kills Polonius—an eavesdropping spy.
- Lord Burghley's advice to his son, "Neither borrow nor lend," closely matches Polonius's advice to his son Laertes—suggesting that the playwright borrowed real-life phrasing.
- Oxford wrote a preface to *Cardanus's Comfort*, a text offering comfort on the harshness of death. There are similar passages to Hamlet's famous "to be or not to be" meditation on death.

## 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 a hyphen. 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. Shakspeare 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. Shakspeare. 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.

Shakspeare 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. Shakspeare'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, 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.



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 royal 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.

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, as we see in *Hamlet*. 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 noblemen "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.

# 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 *Hamlet*, 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 that section of 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 *Hamlet* 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.

## INDEPENDENT PRACTICE:

- Assign students to select a passage from *Hamlet* and write a short analysis (1-2 paragraphs) focusing on the language techniques discussed, or with a partner, present them to the class.
- 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.

## Alignment with Standards

### 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.