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 *Macbeth*:

The Prince of Cumberland! [pause] That is a step
On which I must fall down, [½ pause] or else o'erleap, [½ pause]
For in my way it lies. [pause] Stars, [½ pause] hide your fires; [pause]
Let not light see my black and deep desires. [pause]

Word Order

Look for sentences where the **word order is flipped**, or inverted.
Notice in the example above "For in my way it lies."
Usually, we say "It lies in my way."
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 our example from the play again:

"That is a step on which I must fall down, or else o'erleap."

Here's the same idea with the skipped words added back in:

That is a step on which I must fall down, or else [I must] o'erleap [it].

Who Does What?

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

SUBJECT: the prince
VERB: is
OBJECT: a step (on which I must fall down)

Picture someone tripping on a step and falling down.
Now say the whole thing together in your own words:
"The prince is like a step that will trip me if I don't jump over it."

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 word "o'erleap?" It means to "over-leap," or jump over something.

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 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.

> The Prince of Cumberland! That is a **step**
> (metaphor comparing prince to a step)
> On which I must fall down, or else o'erleap,
> (extending the metaphor)
> For in my way it lies. **Stars, hide your fires;**
> (personification - stars can't literally hide their fires)
> Let not **light see my black and deep desires**.
> (personification - light doesn't "see" something)

We already talked about Macbeth tripping over a step and falling down, or jumping over it. That's the first metaphor, or comparison.
In the second part, he's telling the stars to hide their fires (are they really made of fire that can be hidden?) The light of the stars is symbolic because in Shakespeare's time, the stars symbolized your destiny, the way some people believe in astrology determining their lives. The starlight would shine on his desires, which he wants to keep deeply hidden, like one would hide in the dark. Do you see how much poetry is packed into his lines?

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

Feel the Rhythm

Read the last part of that line again, thinking about syllables:
"...my-black-and-deep-de-sires"

Now say it with added emphasis, or stress, on the rhythm:
"...my BLACK and DEEP deSIRES."

Do you hear the rhythm of 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.

Read these lines from *Macbeth* now:

> "Double, double, toil and trouble:
> Fire burn, and cauldron bubble."

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.

DOUble, DOUble, TOIL and TROUble
FI-re BURN and CAUdron BUBble.

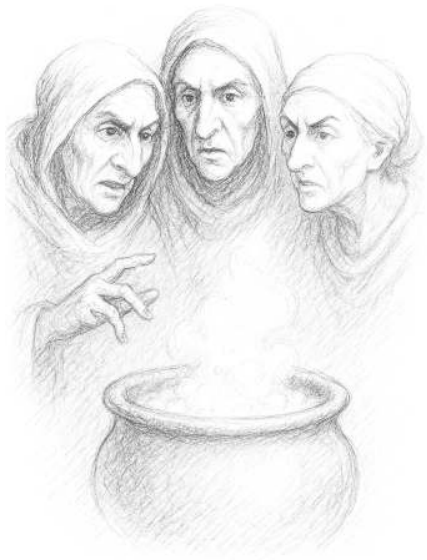
Having an awareness of rhythm will help you appreciate the poetry in the lines.

Wordplay and "Old School" Words

Shakespeare loved puns and wordplay. Even in a violent and serious scene you'll see Lady Macbeth say, "If he do bleed, / I'll gild the faces of the grooms withal, / For it must seem their guilt." The play on words is that gilt and guilt sound the same.

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, witch!"* OR *"We must hence before the army arrives."*
hie—hurry……*"Hie thee hence, or lose thy life!"*
hither—here…..*"Come hither, andstir the cauldron."*
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). *"Help me hence, ho!"* (Lady Macbeth calling for help.)
knave - a low and dishonest person
mark—pay attention to…….. *"Mark my words."*
marry—indeed……*"Marry, sir, nose-painting, sleep, and urine…"*
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?"* (Macbeth hears someone at the gate.)
wherefore—why……"*Wherefore did you so?"* (Banquo questions why Macbeth killed the guards.)



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

1. "Is this a dagger which I see before me…" (Macbeth – Act 2, Scene 1)

Is this a dagger which I see before me,
The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch
thee.
I have thee not, and yet I see thee still.
Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible
To feeling as to sight? or art thou but
A dagger of the mind, a false creation,
Proceeding from the heat-oppressèd brain?

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2. "Out, out, brief candle!" (Macbeth – Act 5, Scene 5)

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time,
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
And then is heard no more.

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3. "Fair is foul, and foul is fair" (Witches – Act 1, Scene 1)

Fair is foul, and foul is fair:
Hover through the fog and filthy air.
When shall we three meet again
In thunder, lightning, or in rain?
When the hurlyburly's done,
When the battle's lost and won.

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4. "Look like the innocent flower…" (Lady Macbeth – Act 1, Scene 5)

Your face, my thane, is as a book where men
May read strange matters. To beguile the time,
Look like the time; bear welcome in your eye,
Your hand, your tongue: look like the innocent flower,
But be the serpent under't.

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5. "Screw your courage to the sticking place…" (Lady Macbeth – Act 1, Scene 7)

We fail?
But screw your courage to the sticking-place,
And we'll not fail. When Duncan is asleep—
Whereto the rather shall his day's hard journey
Soundly invite him—his two chamberlains
Will I with wine and wassail so convince
That memory, the warder of the brain,
Shall be a fume.

6. "Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood…" (Macbeth – Act 2, Scene 2)

Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood
Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather
The multitudinous seas incarnadine,
Making the green one red.

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7. "Out, damned spot!" (Lady Macbeth – Act 5, Scene 1)

Out, damned spot! out, I say!—One: two: why,
then 'tis time to do't.—Hell is murky.—Fie, my
lord, fie! a soldier, and afeard? What need
we fear who knows it, when none can call
our power to account?—Yet who would have
thought the old man to have had so much blood in
him?

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8. "So foul and fair a day I have not seen" (Macbeth – Act 1, Scene 3)

So foul and fair a day I have not seen.
How far is't call'd to Forres?—What are these,
So wither'd and so wild in their attire,
That look not like the inhabitants o' the earth,
And yet are on't?

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9. "I am in blood / Stepp'd in so far…" (Macbeth – Act 3, Scene 4)

I am in blood
Stepp'd in so far that, should I wade no more,
Returning were as tedious as go o'er.
Strange things I have in head, that will to hand,
Which must be acted ere they may be scann'd.

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10. "Double, double toil and trouble…" (Witches – Act 4, Scene 1)

Double, double toil and trouble;
Fire burn and caldron bubble.
Fillet of a fenny snake,
In the caldron boil and bake;
Eye of newt and toe of frog,
Wool of bat and tongue of dog.

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 *Macbeth*, you will find the writer of the play had detailed knowledge of Scotland, of military life and battles, and of the 1587 Scottish law of "double trust.". The law is particular to Scotland, and deals with the murder of an invited guest under one's roof, one of high rank like a king. It is a violation of "double trust," which makes it treason as well as murder, and is mentioned twice in *Macbeth*. Oxford studied law in 1567, and served in a military campaign in Scotland in 1570 under the Earl of Essex, so it makes sense that he would be aware of such details. In 1581, Oxford was also falsely accused of witchcraft by a bitter rival, and three treacherous witches play a key role in our story.

Shakespeare or Shakspere?

Many people assume that William Shakspere (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. Shakspere of Stratford died.

There are four main reasons usually given to support the idea that Mr. Shakspere 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 Shakspere'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, Shakspere'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. Shakspere 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 Shakspere'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. Shakspere was the famous author. It doesn't mention plays, poetry, or acting at all.

The Missing Evidence

If Mr. Shakspere 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 Shakspere 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. Shakspere 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. Shakspere'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, 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.

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 *Macbeth*, 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 *Macbeth* 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.

Educational material developed by Peter Frengel, 2025