



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 *Romeo & Juliet*:

Madam, [$\frac{1}{2}$ pause] an hour before the worshiped sun
Peered forth the golden window of the east [$\frac{1}{2}$ pause]
A troubled mind drove me to walk abroad, [$\frac{1}{2}$ pause]
Where underneath the grove of sycamore
That westward rooteth from this city side, [$\frac{1}{2}$ pause]
So early walking did I see your son. [pause]
Towards him I made, [$\frac{1}{2}$ pause] but he was 'ware of me
And stole into the covert of the wood. [pause]

Word Order

Look for sentences where the word **order is flipped**, or inverted. Notice in the example above "So early walking did I see your son." Usually, we say "I did see your son when I was walking early." 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: "A troubled mind drove me to walk abroad..."

Here's the same idea with the skipped words added back in: "[I had] a troubled mind [which] drove me to walk abroad."

Who Does What?

Keep track of the simple ideas inside the complex ones. Who does what? What is our subject and verb? In our example: "[B]ut he was 'ware of me and stole into the covert of the wood."

SUBJECT: He (Romeo)
VERB: was aware and stole (sneaked) into the woods

Can you picture the scene?

Now say the whole thing together in your own words: "Romeo was aware of me coming and sneaked into the woods."

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 'ware? It means "aware" of course. 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.

Madam, an hour before the worshiped sun [metaphor and personification]
Peered forth the golden window of the east [the sun can't peer through a window]
A troubled mind drove me to walk abroad... [another metaphor and some personification]

Instead of saying "an hour before sunrise I was in a bad mood and took a walk," Shakespeare adds the image of the sun looking through a golden window, using figurative language for its poetic effect.. This kind of poetry is slipped into the dialogue throughout the play, and once you grow used to it, it becomes easier to read.

Feel the Rhythm

Feel the rhythm. Read that last line (above) again, thinking about syllables: "Peered forth the golden window of the east..."

Now say it with added emphasis, or stress, on the rhythm: "Peered-FORTH-the-GOLD-en-WIN-dow-OF-the-EAST."

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 and wordplay. Look at the first four lines of the play and you will see Shakespeare playing with three words that sound almost alike: **collier** (a coal miner), **cholera** (anger) and **collar** (the neck of a shirt). **Cholera** and **collar** are pronounced alike. In this dialogue, Sampson and Gregory are servants, and they don't want to do the lowest chores, like carrying coal to the fireplaces.

SAMPSON	Gregory, on my word we'll not carry coals.
GREGORY	No, for then we should be colliers.
SAMPSON	I mean, an we be in cholera, we'll draw.
GREGORY	Ay, while you live, draw your neck out of collar.

Back in Shakespeare's time, clever people would play with the sound and meaning of words, like comedians do today.

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.."
doth 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). "Give me my long sword, ho!" (Lord Capulet calling for his sword.)
knave - a low and dishonest person "Thou art a knave."



mark—pay attention to..... *“Mark my words.”*
marry—indeed..... *“He says I should reply quickly; marry, I want to.”*
pray/prithee—a polite way of asking something..... *“I prithee answer the question.”*
saucy—rude; sassy..... *“Hence, thou saucy boy!”*
sirrah—a term of address used for servants..... *“Sirrah, Gregory, time to carry coals!”*
whence—from where..... *“Whence came that news?” OR “Return to whence you came.”*
wherefore—why..... *“Wherefore dost thou leave?” OR “Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo?”*

Practice: try applying what you have learned to these famous verses:

1. 'Tis but thy name that is my enemy;
 Thou art thyself, though not a Montague.
 What's Montague? it is nor hand, nor foot,
 Nor arm, nor face, nor any other part
 Belonging to a man. O, be some other name!
 What's in a name? That which we call a rose
 By any other word would smell as sweet.

2. O, then I see Queen Mab hath been with you.
 She is the fairies' midwife, and she comes
 In shape no bigger than an agate stone
 On the forefinger of an alderman,
 Drawn with a team of little atomies
 Athwart men's noses as they lie asleep.

3. O Romeo, Romeo! wherefore art thou Romeo?
 Deny thy father and refuse thy name;
 Or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love,
 And I'll no longer be a Capulet.
 'Tis only thy name that is my enemy.

4. O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright!
 It seems she hangs upon the cheek of night
 Like a rich jewel in an Ethiop's ear;
 Beauty too rich for use, for earth too dear!
 So shows a snowy dove trooping with crows,
 As yonder lady o'er her fellows shows.

5. Thou know'st the mask of night is on my face,
 Else would a maiden blush bepaint my cheek
 For that which thou hast heard me speak tonight.
 Fain would I dwell on form, fain, fain deny
 What I have spoke: but farewell compliment!
 Dost thou love me? I know thou wilt say "Ay."

6. With love's light wings did I o'er-perch these walls;
 For stony limits cannot hold love out,
 And what love can do that dares love attempt;
 Therefore thy kinsmen are no stop to me.
 If they do see thee, they will murder thee.
 Alack, there lies more peril in thine eye
 Than twenty of their swords.

7. These violent delights have violent ends
 And in their triumph die, like fire and powder,
 Which as they kiss consume: the sweetest honey
 Is loathsome in his own deliciousness
 And in the taste confounds the appetite.
 Therefore love moderately; long love doth so;
 Too swift arrives as tardy as too slow.

8. Gallop apace, you fiery-footed steeds,
 Towards Phoebus' lodging: such a waggoner
 As Phaëton would whip you to the west,
 And bring in cloudy night immediately.
 Spread thy close curtain, love-performing night,
 That runaway's eyes may wink and Romeo
 Leap to these arms, untalk'd of and unseen.

9. Ha, banishment! be merciful, say "death;"
 For exile hath more terror in his look,
 Much more than death: do not say "banishment."
 Hence-banished is banish'd from the world,
 And world's exile is death.

10. What if this mixture do not work at all?
 Shall I be married then tomorrow morning?
 No, no! this shall forbid it: lie thou there.
 [Lays down a dagger]
 What if it be a poison, which the friar
 Subtly hath minister'd to have me dead,
 Lest in this marriage he should be dishonour'd,
 Because he married me before to Romeo?
 I fear it is: and yet, methinks, it should not,
 For he hath still been tried a holy man.

A last thought: did Shakespeare really write Shakespeare?

More and more people are starting to question whether William Shakespeare, the actor from Stratford, was really the one who wrote all the famous plays. Some believe the real author might have been Edward de Vere, the Earl of Oxford, who may have used the name "Shakespeare" as a pen name.

In *Romeo and Juliet*, Benvolio says he saw Romeo "underneath the grove of sycamore / That westward rooteth from this city side." Interestingly, there is still a grove of sycamore trees on the west side of Verona today. That's just one example of how the play includes local details that are accurate to real places in Italy.

The man from Stratford never traveled outside England, but the Earl of Oxford visited Verona in 1575 and spent about a year in Italy. The plays include many more correct references to Italian places, customs, and culture. This makes some people think the writer must have lived in Italy and known it well.

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.

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 Shakspeare, 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 *Romeo & Juliet*, 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 *Romeo & Juliet* 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 *Romeo & Juliet* 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 of 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.