

# Reading Shakespeare? This Will Help.

What's so hard about Shakespeare's language? Many students come to Shakespeare's language assuming that the language of his time period is substantially different from ours. In fact 98% of the words in Shakespeare are current-usage English words. So why does it sometimes seem hard to read Shakespeare?

There are three big reasons:

1. Originally, Shakespeare wrote the words for an actor to illustrate them as he spoke. In short, the play you have in hand was meant for the stage, not for the page.
2. Shakespeare had a love of re-forming and re-arranging words; it's not that different from what's found in the lyrics of modern music and the parlance of internet subcultures. His plays reflect an excitement about language and an inventiveness that becomes enjoyable once the reader gets into the experimental spirit of it.
3. Since Shakespeare puts all types of people on stage, those characters will include some who are pompous, some who are devious, some who are boring, and some who are crazy; and all of these people will speak in ways that are sometimes difficult. Modern playwrights and screenwriters creating similar characters have them speak in similarly challenging ways.

In class, you'll read some of the play out loud, and you'll be reading and re-reading at home while preparing for quizzes and journaling. I've prepared twelve tips for reading Shakespeare's early-modern English because it is considerably different from reading almost anything else. That said, once you get used to it, it'll be much more comfortable. Your ability to read raw, unfiltered Shakespeare is an essential skill for this class, so study over this handout before spending time alone with Shakespeare's play, and refer back to it periodically.

1. When reading verse, note the appropriate phrasing and intonation.

DO NOT PAUSE AT THE END OF A LINE unless there is a mark of punctuation.

Shakespearean verse has a rhythm of its own, and once a reader gets used to it, the rhythm becomes very natural to speak in and read. Beginning readers often find it helpful to read a short pause at a comma and a long pause for a period, colon, semicolon, or question mark.

Here's an example from *The Merchant of Venice* (IV.i):

The quality of mercy is not strain'd, (*short pause*)  
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven  
Upon the place beneath: (*long pause*) it is twice blest; (*long pause*)  
It blesseth him that gives, (*short pause*) and him that takes; (*long pause*)  
'tis mightiest in the mighties; (*long pause*) it becomes  
The throned monarch better than his crown; (*long pause*)

2. Reading from punctuation mark to punctuation mark for meaning.

In addition to helping you read aloud, punctuation marks define units of thought. Try to understand each unit as you read, keeping in mind that periods, semicolons, question marks, exclamation points, and (usually) colons all signal the end of a thought. Here's an example from the first scene of the comedy *The Taming of the Shrew*:

LUCENTIO:      Tranio, I saw her coral lips to move,  
                    And with her breath she did perfume the air;  
                    Sacred, and sweet, was all I saw in her.

TRANIO:          Nay, then, 't is time to stir him from his trance.  
                    I pray, awake, sir: if you love the maid,  
                    Bend thoughts and wits to achieve her.

The first complete unit of thought is from "Tranio" to "air":

*He saw her lips move, and her breath perfumed the air.*

The second thought ("Sacred, and sweet...") re-emphasizes the first.

*Tranio replies that Lucentio needs to awaken from his trance and try to win "the maid."*

These two sentences can be considered one unit of thought because of the joining function of the semicolon.

3. In an inverted sentence, the verb comes before the subject. Some lines will be easier to understand if you put the subject first and reword the sentence.

For an example, look at the line below:

*"Never was seen so black a day as this:"*  
*(Romeo and Juliet IV.v)*

You can change its inverted pattern so it is more easily understood:

*"A day as black as this was never seen:"*

If you are having trouble understanding Shakespeare, the first rule is to read it out loud, just as an actor rehearsing would have to do. That will always help you understand how one thought is connected to another.

4. An ellipsis (*this is a separate definition than the three dots used to signify word removal*) occurs when a word or phrase is left out. In *Romeo and Juliet*, Benvolio asks Romeo's father and mother if they know the problem that is bothering their son. Romeo's father answers:

*"I neither know it nor can learn of him"* (*Romeo and Juliet* I.i).

This sentence can be understood to mean,

*"I neither know [the cause of] it,  
Nor can [I] learn [about it from] him."*

5. As you read longer speeches, keep track of the subject, verb, and object – *who* did *what* to *whom*. In the clauses below, note the subject, verbs, and objects.

ROSS: The king hath happily received, Macbeth,  
The news of thy success: and when he reads  
Thy personal venture in the rebel's fight ... (*Macbeth* I.iii)

1<sup>st</sup> clause: *The king hath happily received, Macbeth, / The news of thy success:*

SUBJECT – The king / VERB – has received / OBJECT – the news [of Macbeth's success]

2<sup>nd</sup> clause: *and when he reads / thy personal venture in the rebel's fight,*

SUBJECT – he [the king] / VERB – reads / OBJECT – [about] your venture

In addition to following the subject, verb, and object of a clause, you also need to track pronoun references. In the following soliloquy, Romeo secretly observes Juliet as she steps out on her balcony. To help you keep track of the pronoun references, I've made some notes. (Note that the feminine pronoun sometimes refers to Juliet, but sometimes does not.)

But, soft! What light through yonder window breaks?  
It is the east, and Juliet is the sun!  
Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon,  
Who\* is already sick and pale with grief,  
That thou her\*\* maid art more fair than she.\*\*\*

\* "*Who*" refers to the moon.

\*\* "*thou her maid*" refers to Juliet, the sun.

\*\*\* "*she*" and "*her*" refer to the moon.

In tracking the line of action in a passage, it is useful to identify the main thoughts that are being expressed and paraphrase them. Note the following passage in which Hamlet expresses his feelings about the death of his father and the remarriage of his mother:

O God! a beast that wants discourse of reason  
Would have mourn'd longer – married with my uncle,  
My father's brother, but no more like my father  
Than I to Hercules. (I.ii)

Paraphrasing the three main points, we find that Hamlet is saying:

- a) An unreasonable beast would have mourned longer (than my mother did for my father's death).
- b) Also, my mother is now married to my uncle, my father's brother.
- c) Lastly, my uncle is no more like my father than I am like Hercules (that is, not at all).

6. Shakespeare frequently uses metaphor to illustrate an idea in a unique way. Pay careful attention to the two dissimilar objects or ideas being compared. In *Macbeth*, Duncan, the king says:

I have begun to plant thee, and will labour  
To make thee full of growing. (I.v)

The king compares Macbeth to a tree that he can plant and watch grow.

7. An *allusion* is a reference to some event, person, place, or artistic work which is not directly explained or discussed by the writer; it relies on the reader's familiarity with the item referred to. Allusion is a quick way of conveying information or presenting an image. In the following lines, Romeo alludes to Diana, goddess of the hunt and of chastity, and to Cupid's arrow (love).

ROMEO: Well, in that hit you miss: she'll not be hit  
with Cupid's arrow, she hath Dian's wit;  
and in strong proof of chastity well arm'd ... (I.i)

8. Contracted words are words in which a letter has been left out. They work the same way that modern contractions (like isn't, I'm, and shouldn't) do. Shakespeare often used them to capture a more natural way of speaking or to force iambic meter upon the script. Some that frequently appear are:

be't	on't	wi'
do't	t'	'sblood
'gainst	ta'en	i'
'tis	e'en	o'er
'bout	know'st	'twill
ne'er	o'	

9. Archaic, obsolete and familiar words with unfamiliar definitions may also cause problems.
- Archaic Words** - Some archaic words, like *thee*, *thou*, *thy*, and *thine*, are instantly understandable, while others, like *betwixt*, may cause a momentary pause.
  - Obsolete Words** - If it were not for the notes in a Shakespeare text, obsolete words could be a problem; words like “beteem” are usually not found in high-school dictionaries. In these situations, however, a quick glance at the book’s footnotes will usually solve the problem.
  - Familiar Words with Unfamiliar Definitions** - Another problem is those familiar words whose definitions have changed. Because readers think they know the word, they do not check the notes.

For example, in this comment by Beatrice from *Much Ado About Nothing*, the word *an* means *if*:

“Scratching could not make it worse, *an* ’twere such a face as yours were.” (I.i)

For this kind of word, checking the marginal notes is essential. In this case, Beatrice is saying that scratching up someone’s face couldn’t make it any worse-looking if it were a face like Benedict’s. (Dat boi ugly.)

- Wordplay: puns, double entendres, and malapropisms**
    - A *pun* is a literary device that achieves humor or emphasis by playing on ambiguities. Two distinct meanings are suggested either by the same word or by two similar-sounding words.
    - A *double entendre* is a kind of pun in which a word or phrase has a second, usually sexual, meaning.
    - A *malapropism* occurs when a character mistakenly uses a word that he or she has confused with another word. In *Romeo and Juliet*, the Nurse tells Romeo that she needs to have a “confidence” with him, when she should have said “conference.” Mockingly, Benvolio then says she probably will “indite” (rather than “invite”) Romeo to dinner.
10. **Stage Directions:** Shakespeare’s stagecraft went hand-in-hand with his wordcraft. For that reason, it’s important for the reader to know which stage directions are modern and which derive from Shakespeare’s earliest text. All stage directions appear in italics, but the brackets enclose modern additions to the stage directions. Readers may assume that the unbracketed stage directions appear in the oldest texts of the play’s script.
11. **Scene Locations:** Shakespeare imagined his plays, first and foremost, on the stage of his theatre. The original printed versions of the plays do not give imaginary scene locations, except when they are occasionally mentioned in the dialogue. As an aid to the reader, most copies of Shakespeare’s plays you can buy now do include scene locations at the beginning of each scene, but all such locations are usually placed in brackets to remind the reader that this is not necessarily what Shakespeare envisioned and only possibly what he imagined.

**Background** In September 2008, a large freshman class gathered on the campus of the Catholic University of America (CUA) in Washington, D.C., to begin their college careers. As happens every September, the university faculty greeted them in a convocation. That year, the highlight of the gathering was a speech delivered by English professor **Michael Mack**. Mack began "Why Read Shakespeare?" with a disclosure: as a Shakespeare scholar, he was hardly objective. Still, he noted, the value of reading Shakespeare must, from time to time, be articulated.

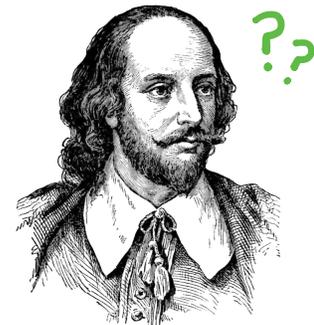
Neither a borrower nor a lender be To be, or not to be—that is the question  
If you prick us, do we not bleed? Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears  
Now is the winter of our discontent  
What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet  
Double, double toil and trouble; fire burn, and cauldron bubble.  
**from Why Read Shakespeare?**  
Cowards die many times before their deaths; the valiant never taste of death but once.  
Et tu, Brute? Parting is such sweet sorrow  
Argument by Michael Mack O Romeo, Romeo! Wherefore art thou Romeo?  
The lady doth protest too much, methinks

**AS YOU READ** Note each reason Mack provides to support his central argument that people should read Shakespeare.

If college is a time for asking questions, it also is a time for broadening your interests. Why should Shakespeare be one of those interests that you seek to develop at CUA? The obvious argument to the contrary is that reading Shakespeare is hard work—and not particularly rewarding, at least the first time round. I would like to begin by addressing what I take to be a perfectly honest response to a first reading of Shakespeare, namely "I don't get it; is it really worth the effort?"

Let me try to explain by comparing Shakespeare to music. We all know that some kinds of music are easy on the ears. This is the ear candy that you like the very first time you hear it. And after you've heard it ten thousand times in twenty four hours, it turns into an ear worm that drives you crazy.

There also is music that you don't particularly like the first time you hear it. But, if you give it a chance, it grows on you. And you discover something new about it every time you listen. At a certain point, if you listen enough, you realize that what seemed random is



*W. Shakespeare*

really better described as “complex.” What had been annoying now instead strikes you as appealingly edgy. And what initially seemed  
20 weird now looks strangely wonderful. This is the way Shakespeare works. He gives you a serious headache the first time you try to understand him—and the second. But if you stick with him, you can expect a breakthrough, and the excitement and satisfaction of being able to say, “I get it.”

The first time you listen to a piece of complex music, you hear but don’t hear. Why should it be any surprise, then, that the first time people read Shakespeare they don’t get it? What would be surprising—and a genuine cause for concern—would be if someone read Shakespeare and thought they’d understood him.

30 This phenomenon of people having difficulty understanding Shakespeare is hardly new. It predates by centuries our **truncated** attention spans and our preference for the fast cuts of modern video. It is a problem that the editors of the First Folio<sup>[1]</sup> addressed in 1623, just seven years after the death of Shakespeare. The editors, John Heminge and Henry Condell, were two of Shakespeare’s fellow players and shareholders in the Globe.<sup>[2]</sup> Addressing the “great variety of readers” of the volume, they wrote:

40 Read him, therefore; and again and again.  
And if then you do not like him, surely  
you are in some manifest danger, not to understand him.

They did not expect readers to understand Shakespeare’s works the first time they read them—and that’s why they recommend rereading—“again and again.” They recognize that Shakespeare is difficult, but they insist that he is worth the effort—and that if someone doesn’t like Shakespeare, it’s their fault, not his.

## A Time for Exploring

The question Heminge and Condell don’t answer—and the one I still haven’t answered—is what you’ve understood when you’ve understood Shakespeare. When you get “it,” what did you get?

50 I’d like to answer this by addressing in particular those who just don’t see themselves as, well, the literary type. Some of you out there are thinking, “Reading Shakespeare—that’s just not me: I’m just a normal guy, and the simple pleasures are good enough for me. Besides, what would my bowling buddies say?” I can hear others out there thinking, “I’m in a professional school, and I just want to get into my professional studies as quickly as

First Folio: the first published collection of Shakespeare’s plays

the Globe: the London theater at which Shakespeare was based



possible.” Still others are thinking, “I much prefer something more scientific—I believe in studying “real” things: fiction is fun to read on summer break, but . . .”

60 In response to these serious-minded objections to reading Shakespeare, I would like to suggest that what you find in Shakespeare is as serious as the subject matter of your other courses. We think of biology and chemistry, history and politics, psychology and sociology as subjects that are focused on the real world. Well, as with these subjects, Shakespeare offers us a lens on the real world in which we live.

In Shakespeare’s time, great books were thought of as mirrors. When you read a great book, the idea is, you are looking into a mirror—a pretty special mirror, one that reflects the world in a way  
70 that allows us to see its true nature. What is more, as we hold the volume of Shakespeare in front of us, we see that it reflects not only the world around us, but also ourselves. What is it that we find in Shakespeare? Nothing less than ourselves and the world—certainly worthy subjects to study in college.

Indeed, some of Shakespeare’s **contemporaries** justified the seriousness of literary fictions by pointing out that Christ Himself used them. Take the parable of the prodigal son:<sup>[3]</sup> in this fiction you learn about sin and forgiveness. And you also learn about yourself. You realize that the story is about you—you are the prodigal son.

80 The problem is that you are not only the prodigal son but also the resentful, self-righteous older brother. As you interpret the

parable of the prodigal son: a New Testament story about a father who celebrates the return of a son who has squandered his birthright.

# “What is it that we find in Shakespeare? Nothing less than ourselves and the world.”

parable, you find that it interprets you—and in multiple ways. As you discover the true meaning of the parable you discover the truth about yourself.

In the case of *Macbeth*, we have a supreme reflection of ambition. But what makes the play terrifying is not that Macbeth looks like a fascist dictator<sup>[4]</sup>—a popular staging these days—but because he looks like us. If you don't see your own overreaching in the phantasmagoric restless ecstasy of Macbeth, you need to read again. Either you don't understand the true nature of Macbeth's

ambition or you don't know yourself. Or, quite possibly, both. What we see in these examples is a fairly complex interplay of life and literature. Literature teaches you about life, and the better you understand literature, the better you understand life. It also is true, though, that the more you know about life, the better equipped you are to understand what you find in literature. This two-way mirroring means that learning about literature and learning about life go hand in hand. And it means that finding beauty and meaning in Shakespeare is a sort of proving ground for finding beauty and meaning in life.

Indeed, as you learn to read Shakespeare, you are learning to read the world. As you interpret Shakespeare's characters, you are practicing figuring out life's characters. Struggling with the complexities involved in interpreting Shakespeare is a superb preparation for struggling with the complexities of life. Shakespeare offers a world of vicarious experience—a virtual reality, a sort of

fascist dictator: authoritarian ruler of an oppressive, nationalistic government.

flight simulator—that gives you a great advantage when it comes time to venture out into the real world.

110 So Shakespeare isn't just for literary types, he is for anyone who is interested in navigating the real world. . . .

## **There is Knowledge and there is Knowledge**

As I conclude, I would like to remind you that college isn't just about your head, it's also about the heart. And, returning to Shakespeare, I can say that he can be particularly helpful in understanding the heart. Read Shakespeare and spare yourself a world of bad dates.

120 Shakespeare shows how the head and the heart need each other. One of the most important things for you to come to understand is your own emotional life. Why do you feel the way you do? Have other people felt this way before? What have they done about it, and how has it turned out?

By reading about the heart, your head and heart become more fully integrated. This integrity, when you understand what you feel and you hear with an understanding heart, is the mark of an educated person. . . .

130 So, again, "Why read Shakespeare?" I've proposed a link between getting to know Shakespeare and getting to know the world and ourselves. I encourage you to test out this hypothesis and to see if in becoming better at the art of reading Shakespeare, you become better at the art of living—to see if through reading Shakespeare you become someone better equipped to find happiness in life, someone who more highly values what is truly valuable in life.

★ Review Mack's argument:

"Why Read Shakespeare?" is an **argument** in which the author attempts to persuade an audience to agree with his point of view. Michael Mack states a **claim**, or thesis, and supports it with valid reasoning and relevant evidence. He also makes these rhetorical choices, which appeal directly to his audience of college freshmen.

- The author directly addresses his audience's **potential concerns**. "Some of you out there are thinking, 'Reading Shakespeare—that's just not me: I'm just a normal guy, and the simple pleasures are good enough for me. Besides, what would my bowling buddies say?'" How might this question appeal to his audience?
- The author uses **comparisons** that his audience will relate to. He begins the speech by comparing Shakespeare to music. What assumption is the author making about his audience by using this comparison?
- The author appeals directly to the audience's **self-interest**. He explains that reading Shakespeare can ultimately help students understand matters of the heart: "Read Shakespeare and spare yourself a world of bad dates."

★ Consider the following questions in order to review the article:

- **Identify** Why did Shakespeare's contemporaries recommend rereading his works, and what might this information suggest to current readers?
- **Infer** Mack uses the term "ear candy" in line 11. What does he mean by this term? How might the term appeal to his audience?
- **Cite Evidence** What evidence does the author provide to support the claim that Shakespeare's works reflect the world and ourselves?
- **Analyze** The author concludes the speech with a kind of challenge to his audience. Review lines 125–132, and then explain why he included this content.

- ★ Look up the definitions of the **bolded** vocabulary in the article, and review their meanings in context.

THESE QUESTIONS  
ARE INTENDED FOR  
YOUR THOUGHTFUL  
REVIEW — NOT AS  
PROMPTS TO  
ACTUAL WRITTEN  
RESPONSES.