

Exploring Shakespeare's Language: Paraphrase & Translation as learning tools

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Some people balk at the idea of saying Shakespeare with any words other than Shakespeare's. But we all know how challenging comprehension can be, even for the savviest reader. Subject-verb order is often switched; many words and phrases have complex meanings; and there are those pesky Thee's and Thou's! (*Professional actors always 'put Shakespeare into their own words' as part of their rehearsal process!*)

This is the work that is usually done by companion texts like *No Fear Shakespeare*; but encouraging students to do the translations themselves is a great way to slow down reading and encourage close analysis.

Use this exercise to:

- Encourage close reading of the text
- Parse subject-verb agreements of Shakespeare's sentences
- Uncover important words and phrases
- Discover the throughline of character thought

Individually or in pairs/groups, have students re-write a line or section of Shakespeare text in their own words. Consider splitting up a famous monologue or scene among the class, so that the final 'translation' can be performed by the full group.

We've provided Cassius' monologue from Act 1 scene 2 of JULIUS CAESAR as an example, in a [companion handout](#). The monologue has been split up into relatively equal parts, for assigning to different groups and students.

Some guidelines:

Be sure that the translations honor the full complexity of the original.

"He's a big statue" is NOT an accurate paraphrase of "Why man, he doth bestride the world like a Colossus."



Don't confuse paraphrase with subtext.

"Men at some time are masters of their fates" does NOT translate to "We should kill Caesar."

Don't worry about verse/poetic structure.

Keep thoughts and ideas together, but a translation doesn't have to 'fit' the structure of any particular line of verse. (This exercise can help you discover how single thoughts flow across multiple lines of verse.)

Variation for Performance: "Shakespeare Sandwich"

If you're working with students who will be performing Shakespeare for an audience, or would like to reinforce verbal reading fluency, continue the exercise by having them speak their own translation, one phrase at a time, then returning to Shakespeare's text.

Ideally, their translation will help them find useful vocal intonations, appropriate word emphasis, etc.

(The "sandwich" is made up of Shakespeare's words on either side, and a contemporary interpretation in the middle.)

Example: (the speaker says everything below):

"Men at some time are masters of their fates.... Sometimes we're in charge of our own destiny.... Men at some time are masters of their fates."

