

Exploring Shakespeare's Language: "Reading" with Punctuation

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There are many useful tools for analyzing Shakespeare's text; punctuation is one of our favorites! The exercises below introduce punctuation as a way of 'shaping' the thoughts and ideas in Shakespeare's texts, and are inspired by the work of renowned vocal coach and teacher Cicely Berry.

Use this exercise to:

- Encourage slow reading, and help students find the smaller thoughts and ideas
- Discover the 'shape' and journey of a character's thought
- Experience the difference between **reading** Shakespeare's plays and **embodying** them by speaking the character's words
- Analyze characters' inner subtext, motivation and 'state of mind'

Preparing for the exercise:

- Clear desks and chairs from the center of the room, so that students have ample room to walk and move around as they work.
- Hand out a physical, printed copy of a speech to each student. Be sure that the font and spacing is large enough to read easily. (We've provided Claudius' speech from Act 3 scene 3 of HAMLET below.)
- For this exercise, we recommend that all students work - and speak! - simultaneously. Being able to read the words aloud while no one is actively listening can ease the pressure off for students, who are often nervous or scared to 'perform' in front of each other, and who may have varying levels of comfort with reading Shakespeare's language.

The exercise: "Walking" the text and punctuation:

- Give the speech a 'first read' - speak the speech aloud while standing still.
- Speak the speech a second time while walking around the room.

Pause and check in with students - where can you build vocabulary, and look up words you don't immediately understand?

- Speak/walk the speech again; this time, each time there is any kind of punctuation, change direction before you continue walking.



- What do you hear? What rhythms (or changes in rhythm) do you notice? Where is the speech difficult to ‘walk’ – where does the punctuation get erratic, constant, etc.? What might that communicate about the speaker’s state of mind or ability (or inability) to find the right words?
- Walk the speech again; this time, mark the difference between **end stop** punctuation and everything else (“end stops” are anything that end a sentence: periods, question marks, exclamation marks.) Notice how many - or how few - complete sentences there actually are.
- How does the punctuation help shape the character’s thoughts and ideas, and provide clues to their inner state of mind?

Working with the HAMLET speech below:

- Notice how the punctuation changes, and gets more irregular, over the course of the speech. How is this a reflection of Claudius’ state of mind? Why?
- How many questions does he actually ask, and what are they?
- What are the complete, unbroken thoughts (no punctuation)? Why is Claudius able to speak these thoughts so easily and clearly?

Variation: for Performance

Punctuation helps parse meaning, and can help us find the initial ‘frame’ of the thoughts. It is also a barometer for pace, energy, and rhythm. (Shakespeare used punctuation like contemporary playwrights use stage directions: as indicators of emotional, physical and dramatic effect.)

Be sure to consult multiple editions and choose your preferred punctuation. MIT Shakespeare is usually reliable; the First Folio is definitive.

- **Full stops/end stops** indicate completion of a thought. (periods, exclamation marks, question marks)
- **Commas and hyphens** indicate thinking and elaboration of thought. You, the speaker, are working something out in real time as you speak.
- **Colons and semi-colons** are like gear shifts. They mark the end of a phrase, but not the end of the full thought. They tell the actor that a shift in energy is needed.
- **Question marks** are a legitimate query, and demand an answer of the listener(s).
- **Note:** Be cautious of exclamation marks in contemporary texts. These are often editorial additions.

A note about punctuation in Shakespeare: Most punctuation that we see in Shakespeare today has been emended by contemporary editors. If you read different editions of the same Shakespeare play, you might come across very different versions of how punctuation is used.

For more on different versions of Shakespeare, including the original ones, [click here!](#)



HAMLET Act 3, scene 3

From [MIT Shakespeare online](#)

King Claudius has just watched - and run away from - the performance of "The Murder of Gonzago," which Hamlet had the players perform for the court. While watching the performance, Claudius' guilt starts to catch up with him for killing his brother and taking his crown. Here, he's trying to convince himself to pray to God/Heaven for forgiveness.

CLAUDIUS:

O, my offence is rank it smells to heaven;
It hath the primal eldest curse upon't,
A brother's murder. Pray can I not,
Though inclination be as sharp as will:
My stronger guilt defeats my strong intent;
And, like a man to double business bound,
I stand in pause where I shall first begin,
And both neglect. What if this cursed hand
Were thicker than itself with brother's blood,
Is there not rain enough in the sweet heavens
To wash it white as snow? Whereto serves mercy
But to confront the visage of offence?
And what's in prayer but this two-fold force,
To be forestalled ere we come to fall,
Or pardon'd being down? Then I'll look up;
My fault is past. But, O, what form of prayer
Can serve my turn? 'Forgive me my foul murder'?
That cannot be; since I am still possess'd
Of those effects for which I did the murder,
My crown, mine own ambition and my queen.
May one be pardon'd and retain the offence?
In the corrupted currents of this world
Offence's gilded hand may shove by justice,
And oft 'tis seen the wicked prize itself
Buys out the law: but 'tis not so above;



There is no shuffling, there the action lies
In his true nature; and we ourselves compell'd,
Even to the teeth and forehead of our faults,
To give in evidence. What then? what rests?
Try what repentance can: what can it not?
Yet what can it when one can not repent?
O wretched state! O bosom black as death!
O limed soul, that, struggling to be free,
Art more engaged! Help, angels! Make assay!
Bow, stubborn knees; and, heart with strings of steel,
Be soft as sinews of the newborn babe!
All may be well.



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