

# HOW TO READ A SHAKESPEARE PLAY

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It takes at least 3 hours to read a Shakespeare play, and even then you'll only get the gist. If you don't mind spoilers, I recommend that you read a plot summary first (although don't believe it!) and then the play. Read the play once for story and theme, and then once again according to your own readerly sensibilities and noting the following:

1. Each character's **first lines**. They often serve as an index of a character. See, for example, Hamlet's "A little more than kin and less than kind."
2. **Characters' entrances and exits**. While act and scene breaks are often editorial interventions, characters' entrances and exits often give us a lot of crucial information about character, plot and theme. Note, for example, Lady Macbeth's entrances, particularly after Macbeth claims he has "no spur/To prick the sides of [his murderous] intent" (1.7).
3. **Embedded stage directions**. See, for example, King Lear's "Give me that map there," Othello's "this handkerchief is too little," Desdemona's "Why do you speak so startingly and rash?" and *Macbeth's* "Look to the Lady!"
4. The play's **prop list**, which is indicated primarily through embedded stage directions. The props in *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, tell a great deal about the arc of the play: a transition from torches and masks to crowbars and poison. (Note for example "Give me that mattock and the wrenching-iron" [5.3.22]). See as well Brutus's line, "Look, Lucius, here's the book I sought for so;/I put it in the pocket of my gown. (4.2.302-3), which indicates a less-noted theme in *Julius Caesar*, and the ambiguity of Macbeth's "Is this a dagger which I see before me," which opens up a range of interpretive and performance possibilities.
5. The **Image sets** associated with specific characters or places. Note, for example, the contrast between Macbeth's "borrowed robes" and Banquo's organic, vegetal metaphors.



6. **Key words.** Oft-repeated and thematically-important words in *Hamlet* include “dispatch,” “kind,” and “matter”; in *King Lear*, “superfluous,” “poor,” “nothing”; in *As You Like It*, “brother,” “cousin,” and “even.” Use the *Oxford English Dictionary* to research words that you sense might have meant something (surprisingly) different in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries than they mean now. Examples include “conceit,” “maid,” “effeminate,” “character,” “glass” and “fashion,” “gossip,” and “friend.”
7. When and which characters speak in **prose, blank verse and rhymed verse** (and what *kind* of verse. Note, for example, the difference between the verse spoken by Phoebe and Orlando in *As You Like It*). A great way to teach the differences between verse and prose is via the first scene in *King Lear*, in which Gonoril and Regan shift from (“glib and oily”) verse to (brutally truth-telling) prose.
8. **Metrical completion.** When one character completes another’s line of iambic pentameter, Shakespeare is often telling us something about intimacy or enmity.

Note, for example, Kent’s interruption of Lear’s rant at Cordelia:

**LEAR** As thou my sometime daughter.  
**KENT** Good my liege – .

Note as well a crucial exchange between Macbeth and Banquo which illustrates their moral differences:

**MACBETH** If you shall cleave to my consent, when 'tis,  
 It shall make honour for you.  
**BANQUO** So I lose none  
 In seeking to augment it, but still keep  
 My bosom franchised and allegiance clear,  
 I shall be counsell'd (2.1).



Or this one, between Malcolm and Macduff:

**MALCOLM** Dispute it like a man.

**MACDUFF** I shall do so;

But I must also feel it as a man (4.3.219-22)

**A note on editions.** Scholarly editions of the plays are useful for their introduction and notes. Popular ones include Oxford World Classics, Arden, Norton, and Folger. (I have taught using all four. Folger editions are the least expensive.) The Bedford “Texts and Contexts” include primary documents. (They don’t have editions for all the plays, but see their [Romeo and Juliet](#) for an example.) You can find [all the plays](#) – and all the factual information about [Shakespeare’s life](#) – on the Folger Library website, *for free*. You can examine what is known as the [First Folio](#), the collection of Shakespeare’s plays published in 1623, as well as [“quarto” editions](#) (referring to the number of times a sheet of paper was folded – four! – to make a pocket-/pamphlet-sized book) that were published as stand-alone volumes, often immediately following successful performances. Some plays, including *Romeo and Juliet*, [King Lear](#), and *Hamlet* were published in more than one quarto edition, thus the monikers Q1 and Q2, which you often see in scholarly editions. You can also get a general companion to Shakespeare in book form. (I like [this one](#).) There are also useful reference volumes on topics of particular interest including [race](#) and [sexuality](#).

