



SHAKESPEARE *for Students*[™]

The Language of Shakespeare Grades 7-12

Program Overview

While Shakespeare is widely noted for his command of language, his language can sometimes be a huge stumbling block for students. Because he composed his works at a time when the English language was in transition, the meaning of some words he used has shifted greatly while other words are no longer used today. New words were being coined and recorded in print. Shakespeare was experimenting with his use of language — playing with word order and sometimes omitting letters or whole words to maintain a rhythm or meter. This series of short instructional clips help students to understand the meaning behind words like “prithce” and “anon,” distinguish between prose and verse, appreciate Shakespeare’s clever use of the pun, and discover the structure and language of his sonnets.

Shakespeare for Students is designed as a series of brief 3-5 minute clips that highlight specific topics using thoughtful discussions, clear explanations, carefully chosen examples and the reading of passages. Clips can be viewed individually or in groups. Teachers can also choose to show the clips in an order that works for them and their curriculum.

Vocabulary

archaic — An adjective used to describe something that is no longer in widespread use.

Early Modern English — The term commonly used to refer to the English language used when Shakespeare’s works were written. Early Modern English emerged around the beginning of the 16th century and reflects the rapid expansion of language during the Renaissance through contact with other cultures, the revival of ancient cultures, and the developing fields of science, medicine and the arts.

thou — In Early Modern English, a second-person pronoun used in informal situations. “Thou” functions as a subject.

thee — In Early Modern English, a second-person pronoun used in informal situations. “Thee” functions as an object.

you — In Early Modern English, a second-person pronoun used in formal situations. “You” was a respectful way for people to address those with a higher social status. It was also used by those in the upper classes to address each other.

puns — A play on words that have the same sound, or a similar sound, but different meanings.

prose — Writing that reflects ordinary speech. There is no prescribed number of syllables and no set pattern of emphasis.

verse — Writing that is printed with line breaks. In Shakespeare’s plays, each line begins with a capital letter. Verse lines often have a set meter.

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blank verse — Poetry with a regular meter but no rhyme. Iambic pentameter is often used with blank verse.

meter — A repeated pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables.

iambic pentameter — A meter in which each unstressed syllable is followed by a stressed syllable. Typically, each line consists of five unstressed/stressed syllable pairs for a total of ten syllables.

Shakespearean sonnet — A poem structure that consists of 14 lines, typically written in iambic pentameter. The first 12 lines are divided into quatrains, sets of 4 lines, each with its own rhyme scheme. The sonnet closes with a couplet, a rhymed pair of lines.

Archaic Words & Unusual Meanings

Content includes:

- An introduction to archaic words in Shakespeare’s works.
- Familiar words with unfamiliar meanings that can cause confusion.
- The importance of seeing and hearing Shakespeare’s works performed to increase understanding.

Discussion Questions & Activities

- Introduce students to the longest word used by Shakespeare in his plays: “honorificabilitudinitatibus.” It is found in *Love’s Labour Lost*. What do they think it means? Why do they think this word is no longer used today?
- Discuss how words can rise and fall in their use. For example, while words like “prithce” and “zounds” were once popular, they are rarely used today. Are there modern-day equivalents for words like these?
- Have students choose a passage from a Shakespearean play that includes some archaic words and rewrite it in modern English. Invite them to share their reworked pieces in small groups.

Word Arrangements & Omissions

Content includes:

- Why Shakespeare sometimes employed unusual word arrangements even though people did not necessarily speak the way he wrote during that time.
- Shakespeare’s use of omissions to maintain a certain meter or rhythm.

Discussion Questions & Activities

- Although Shakespeare took great liberties in manipulating the word order of his sentences, actors of his work often articulate these sentences in a way that makes the meaning clear to the audience. Invite students to study passages in which Shakespeare plays with word order. Visit www.folger.edu/template.cfm?cid=940 for some suggestions from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Even better, watch actual performances to hear how actors convey these passages. Then, have students give their own dramatic readings. What techniques or strategies did they use to make their meaning clear?
- Omissions were often used to quicken speech — something we continue to do today. We might ask a friend, “Goin’ to the football game?” Even with some omissions, the meaning of what is being asked is still clear: “Are you going to the football game?” Have students come up with other examples of modern-day omissions.

The Use of Thee, Thou & Verb Endings

Content includes:

- In Early Modern English, “thee” and “thou” were considered informal second-person pronouns. “You” was considered formal.
- The word “thou” also triggered some unusual verb inflections. Adding “-st” or “-est” endings to verbs linked with “thou” forms these inflections (e.g., thou dost, thou knowest).

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Discussion Questions & Activities

- Have students identify passages where “thee” and “thou” appear and use context and information about the characters to determine why Shakespeare may have chosen those pronouns. Students can take the exercise a step further by acting out these passages. Are there instances when Shakespeare seems inconsistent with his use of “thou” and “you”? Why might this be the case? Was it done to help develop a character, to maintain a rhythm or for some other purpose? Visit www.bardweb.net/content/thou.html for additional information.
- The “-st” and “-est” verb endings were used with “thou,” a second-person familiar pronoun. Have students try to use these inflections in conversations with each other. Then, ask them to make comic strips that illustrate interactions between two characters. Perhaps they can be spin-offs of the play they are reading. Encourage them to squeeze in a lot of these verb inflections.

New Words & Phrases

Content includes:

- New words recorded by Shakespeare in his writing. While many new words appear in Shakespeare’s works, it is difficult to determine how many he actually invented.
- New phrases coined by Shakespeare in his writing, including some that are everyday expressions even today (e.g., “come full circle,” “dead as a doornail”).

Discussion Questions & Activities

- Many of the phrases Shakespeare coined are still in use today. Visit www.lomonico.com/bookch4.html for a list. Highlight some of these phrases with students and discuss any that are unclear in meaning. Individually or in small groups, have students work to compose a dialogue or other dramatic piece that contains these phrases. Students can perform their work while their peers try to listen for some of Shakespeare’s phrases.

Puns

Content includes:

- An introduction to puns as clever wordplay.
- How Shakespeare used puns to give characters a quick-witted edge, add humor to a scene or to imply something through innuendo.
- Overview of blank verse and iambic pentameter.

Discussion Questions & Activities

- The spelling and pronunciation of words are ever evolving, and during Shakespeare’s time, the pronunciation of vowels was shifting. Words like “love” and “prove” were once perfect rhymes, for example. How might these shifts cause us to miss some puns in Shakespeare’s plays? Visit internetsakespeare.uvic.ca/Library/SLT/literature/pronunciation.html for additional information.
- Because Shakespeare’s puns are sometimes difficult to spot due to shifts in spelling and pronunciation, try to engage students with some contemporary non-Shakespearean puns as a starter. Visit www.tnellen.com/cybereng/lit_terms/puns.html for some inspiration and then have students write and share their own puns.
- When characters use puns back and forth with each other a deeper relationship or connection can often be sensed. Consider the pun-filled exchange between Petruchio and Kate in Act 2, Scene 1 of *Taming of the Shrew*. What is happening between them? Are there examples of this type of pun use in other plays?

Prose & Verse

Content includes:

- Characteristics of prose and how it is used in Shakespeare’s plays.
- Characteristics of verse and Shakespeare’s use of this form.
- Overview of blank verse and iambic pentameter.

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Discussion Questions & Activities

- Have you ever noticed that some verse lines are broken in a way that two characters share them? You see a lot of this in a conversation between Desdemona and Emilia in Act 4, Scene 3 of *Othello*. Have students visit this and other passages that feature shared lines. Read them aloud or watch them performed. How are they read? Why do you think Shakespeare chose to write them as shared lines?
- The most natural sounding meter and the one most frequently used by Shakespeare was iambic pentameter, in which the meter seesaws back and forth, mimicking the beating of the heart. Have students place their hand over their heart and feel the rate at which it beats. Provide students with passages written in iambic pentameter. Have students read these passages to themselves with their hand over their heart, using the heartbeats as a guide. For more information, visit www.shakespeareinamericanlife.org/education/schooldays/iambicpentameter.cfm for a great resource on iambic pentameter by the Folger Shakespeare Library.

Shakespeare’s Sonnets

Content includes:

- The structure of a Shakespearean sonnet.
- Shakespeare’s sonnet sequence.

Discussion Questions & Activities

- The sonnet is a poetic form with Italian roots. Petrarch popularized the form during the Italian Renaissance. His love sonnets (over 300 of them) were addressed to an idealized woman named Laura. The popularity of sonnets spread throughout Europe and the form was adjusted for different languages. The form Shakespeare used, as a result, was different from that of Petrarch. Have students compare and contrast these two forms of sonnets.
- *Shakespeare’s Sonnets, Never Before Published* was published in 1609. However, it is believed that Shakespeare was circulating at least some of his sonnets amongst his friends about ten years earlier. In fact, there was a period of inactivity in the theater in the early 1590s due to the London plague. It is believed that Shakespeare began his sonnets during this time. Discuss reasons why they were not published until several years later.
- Compare and contrast, using evidence from the sonnets, the friend and the dark lady.

Suggested Resources

- www.folger.edu/
The Folger Shakespeare Library web site provides detailed information on the life and works of William Shakespeare. Visit the “Teach and Learn” section for a variety of resources that can be used with a number of Shakespeare’s plays.
- www.bardweb.net/language.html
The Shakespeare Resource Center provides a collection of links to aid both students and teachers in understanding Shakespeare and his use of language.
- www.opensourceshakespeare.org/concordance/
The concordance on the Open Source Shakespeare web site is a great tool for studying Shakespeare’s language, particularly archaic words and words with unusual meanings.
- Crystal, David & Ben Crystal. *Shakespeare’s Words: A Glossary and Language Companion*. Penguin, New York, NY; 2002.
- Dunton-Downing, Leslie & Alan Riding. *Essential Shakespeare Handbook*. DK Publishing, New York, NY; 2004.
- LoMonico, Michael. *The Shakespeare Book of Lists*. The Career Press, Franklin Lakes, NJ; 2001.

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Selected Works Featured in this Show

- Shakespeare, William. *Hamlet*. Folger Shakespeare Library. Washington Square Press, New York, NY; 1992.
- Shakespeare, William. *Henry IV, Part 1*. Folger Shakespeare Library. Washington Square Press, New York, NY; 2005.
- Shakespeare, William. *Julius Caesar*. Folger Shakespeare Library. Washington Square Press, New York, NY; 1992.
- Shakespeare, William. *King Lear*. Folger Shakespeare Library. Washington Square Press, New York, NY; 1993.
- Shakespeare, William. *Measure for Measure*. Folger Shakespeare Library. Washington Square Press, New York, NY; 1997.
- Shakespeare, William. *Merchant of Venice*. Folger Shakespeare Library. Washington Square Press, New York, NY; 1992.
- Shakespeare, William. *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Folger Shakespeare Library. Washington Square Press, New York, NY; 1993.
- Shakespeare, William. *Romeo and Juliet*. Folger Shakespeare Library. Washington Square Press, New York, NY; 1992.
- Shakespeare, William. *Shakespeare's Sonnets*. Folger Shakespeare Library. Washington Square Press, New York, NY; 2004.

TEACHER'S GUIDE

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COMPLETE LIST OF TITLES

The Characters of Shakespeare

The Language of Shakespeare

Key Passages in Shakespeare's Plays



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