

S T R A T E G I E S

Strategies for Understanding Shakespeare's Language

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, dash, or question mark.

Here's an example from *The Merchant of Venice*, Act IV, Scene 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. Read 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, colons, semicolons, and question marks signal the end of a thought. Here's an example from *The Taming of the Shrew*: Act I, Scene i:

Luc. 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.
Tra. Nay, then, 'tis 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 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.

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 example, look at the line below:

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

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

"A day as black as this was never seen."

4. An ellipsis 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*, Act I, Scene i).

This sentence can easily 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*, Act I, Scene iii)

I^s 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]

2nd clause: *and when he reads/they 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, who is madly in love with Juliet, secretly observes her as she steps out on her balcony. To help you keep track of the pronoun references, we've made margin 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. (*Hamlet*, Act I, Scene ii)

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

- a mindless beast would have mourned the death of its mate longer than my mother did
- she married my uncle, my father's brother
- my uncle is not at all like my father

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 help you understand how one thought is connected to another.

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. (*Macbeth*, Act I, Scene v)

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

7. An **allusion** is a reference to some event, person, place, or artistic work, 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
(*Romeo and Juliet*, Act I, Scene i)

8. Contracted words are words in which a letter has been left out. Some that frequently appear:

be't	o'n'i	wi'
do't	t'	'sblood
'gainst	ra'en	i'
'tis	en	
'bout	know'st	'twill
ne'er	o'	o'er

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*, 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 *betwixt* are usually not found in student dictionaries. In these situations, however, a quick glance at the book's notes will 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 from *Much Ado About Nothing*, Act I, Scene i, the word *an* means “if”:

BEATRICE: Scratching could not make it worse, an 'twere such a face as yours were.

For this kind of word, we have included margin notes.

10. 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.

11. Shakespeare’s Language:

Our final word on Shakespeare’s language is adapted by special permission from Ralph Alan Cohen’s book *Shakespeare and How to Cure It—A Guide to Teaching Shakespeare*.

What’s so hard about Shakespeare’s language? Many students come to Shakespeare’s language assuming that the language of his 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 main reasons:

- Originally, Shakespeare wrote the words for an actor to illustrate them as he spoke. In short, the play you have at hand was meant for the stage, not for the page.
- Shakespeare had the same love of reforming and rearranging words in such places as hip-hop and sportscasting today. His plays reflect an excitement about language and an inventiveness that becomes enjoyable once the reader gets into the spirit of it.

- 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 will speak in ways that are sometimes trying. Modern playwrights creating similar characters have them speak in similarly challenging ways.

12. Stage Directions:

Shakespeare’s stagecraft went hand-in-hand with his wordcraft. For that reason, we believe it is important for the reader to know which stage directions are modern and which derive from Shakespeare’s earliest text—the single-play Quartos or the Folio, the first collected works (1623). 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 Quarto and/or Folio versions of the play.

13. Scene Locations:

Shakespeare imagined his plays, first and foremost, on the stage of his outdoor or indoor 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, this edition *does* include scene locations at the beginning of each scene, but puts all such locations in brackets to remind the reader that *this is not what Shakespeare envisioned and only possibly what he imagined*.

R E A D I N G P O I N T E R S

Reading Pointers for Sharper Insights

As you read *Hamlet*, be aware of the following themes and concepts:

Death. *Hamlet* begins shortly after the murder of a king and ends with the deaths of four of the major characters. Throughout the play, at least four others die, either onstage or off. Hamlet considers what death is many times during the play. He wonders about suicide, the afterlife, and what happens to the physical body after death. The scene with the gravediggers, while filled with humor, shows Hamlet's preoccupation with death. And even later in Act V, Hamlet states that being ready for death is what is important.

Sickness and imbalance: In the play, not only are many characters out of balance, but the whole country of Denmark, with Claudius at its head, seems to have grown ill. Natural order has been disrupted, which manifests itself through the duplicity of the court, the turning of friends into foes, the rejection of love, the appearance of the Ghost, Hamlet's condemnations of women, and the continued use of lies and deception for personal gain. One can assume that under the rule of King Hamlet, these symptoms of corruption were infrequent.

Madness: It is sometimes difficult to determine who is sane in the play. At one time, Hamlet claims he will merely pretend to be mad; at another, he claims that he cannot reason properly and that his mind is diseased. His mother, Polonius, and Ophelia all believe he is insane, but his friend Horatio does not. Polonius is not mad, but is so intently and illogically focused on Hamlet's behavior that he could be said to be obsessive to the point of lunacy. Ophelia is driven mad by the murder of her father, among other factors, and commits suicide.

Acting and plays: Notice the references to the differences between being on a stage and actually living. This type of duality runs throughout *Hamlet*. Except for Horatio, few characters in *Hamlet* consistently say what they believe is true. Claudius, who hates and fears Hamlet, pretends to love him; Ophelia must deny Hamlet her love, while Hamlet claims never to have loved; Rosencrantz and Guildenstern act like friends, but they are really spies; and Hamlet is not really sure if the Ghost is playing a part to send him to hell. The play-within-a-play—actors performing a scene written by Hamlet, pretending to portray a real event—is a crucial element in Hamlet's decision-making.

Children and parents: There are two family relationships in the play. Hamlet's is the most difficult, and he makes sure that everyone at court understands how it pains him. Claudius, who killed King Hamlet, was his uncle, but is now his father, which makes Hamlet both a nephew and a son to the same man. Gertrude, once a sister-in-law to Claudius, is now his wife. Polonius wants his son Laertes to be independent and mature, but sends a servant to spy on him. Ophelia obviously loves Hamlet, yet out of duty, obeys Polonius and rejects him.

Sleep and dreams: Hamlet is consumed by the need for revenge, yet he seems to be incapable of taking any action to obtain it. Instead, he only debates what he should do, contemplates whether the Ghost tells the truth, wonders if suicide is preferable to regicide, intellectualizes his possibilities, and frequently doubts his choices; yet he constantly berates his inaction. Until Hamlet's inadvertent killing of Polonius, he has taken no action on the Ghost's demand.

Symbols and motifs: rot/decay; gardens/flowers/weeds; worms/snakes/venom/poison; eyes/ears/skulls; incest/sexuality; black/darkness; morality/corruption; appearances/reality/dreams