

SHAKESPEARE!

The Briefest Introduction



Who was Shakespeare?

William Shakespeare lived from 1564-1616, and was a British actor, playwright, and poet. He wrote 154 sonnets, 2 long poems, and 38 plays that are still being performed 400 years after his death. Many people consider him one of the greatest writers of all time!

Why do we still read Shakespeare?

Before Shakespeare, plays were usually about morals, and were supposed to give strict lessons on how people should live their lives. Shakespeare's plays were among the first to explore human psychology—*why* we do the things we do—and people loved it because it spoke to their own individual experiences. His plays were the blockbusters of his time, and everybody went to see them (and they got to eat Elizabethan popcorn and candy too!). His plays have hilarious jokes, biting insults, touching romances, gory deaths, and epic sword fights. Plus, Shakespeare was the master of slang: he invented over 1700 brand new words, many of which we still use today!

Understanding Shakespeare

These handouts and exercises are designed to increase students' understanding of Shakespeare, particularly when tackling the material on their own. It can be applied to reading homework or performance, and will help students in English and Drama classes alike. In this packet are:

1. Basic Elizabethan lingo handout (p. 2).
2. Iambic pentameter handout (p. 3-5).
3. In-class or at-home student exercises (p. 6).

Elizabethan Slang

Folks living in the Elizabethan Era (1558-1603) had their own contemporary slang. Much like they would need a cheat sheet to talk to anyone in 2016 (“Did you see that eyebrows-on-fleek meme? I LOL’d and had to share it on Instagram!”), this cheat sheet will help when you read words you don’t recognize.

anon - soon

art - are

canst / couldst - can / could

didst / dost / doth - did / do / does

fain - gladly, surely, definitely

fie - curse/curses!, used to express outrage

hark / mark - listen / pay attention

hast - have

hence - go, be gone, away

hie - get

hither / thither - here / there

ho - used as a greeting, like hey!

marry - surely, indeed

pray / prithee - beg / please (prithee is “pray thee”)

thee / thou - you

thine / thy - your

wilt / wouldst - will / would

whence - where

wherefore - why

Iambic Pentameter

What sets Shakespeare apart from other playwrights is the **rhythm** of his language—and that rhythm comes from his use of iambic pentameter. Songs, especially rap songs, are written to a certain beat, and the songs don't make sense without that beat. That's what iambic pentameter is!

Pentameter means there are **5 iambs** in 1 line of text (penta=5, meter=rhythm).

One **iamb** = 2 beats (or syllables): 1 **unstressed** (u), 1 **stressed** (/).

So 5 iambs x 2 beats = 10 beats total.

u / u / u / u / u /
da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM

Take the opening one of Shakespeare's most famous poems, Sonnet 18:

Shall I compare thee to a summer's day?

Let's count the iambs—there should be 5 in this line with 2 syllables each.

We'll put parentheses around each one.

1 iamb 2 iamb 3 iamb 4 iamb 5 iamb
(*Shall I*) (*compare*) (*thee to*) (*a summ*)(*er's day?*)

An iamb can fall in the middle of a word, like you see in 'summer.'
Now let's look at the stresses. Remember, 1 iamb=1 unstressed + 1 stressed.

u / u / u / u / u /
(*Shall I*) (*com**PARE***) (*thee **TO***) (*a **SUMM***)(*er's **DAY?***)

Now try it on your own with the next line of the sonnet.
Parentheses around iambs, o over unstressed beats, / over stressed beats.

Thou art more lovely and more temperate.

Remember, you should've found 5 iambs, 5 o beats, and 5 / beats. Did you?

Iambic Pentameter (Cont'd)

Rhythm and meter play a big part in understanding text. **Scansion** or **scanning** is what we do when we figure out the rhythm and meter of a line. Here are more breakdowns of different meters and different feet (“**feet**” mean the patterns that make up the beats—an iamb is a type of “foot”).

Meter

Meter: the number of feet in a line (total # of syllables in parentheses).

monometer - one feet (2)

hexameter - six feet (12)

dimeter - two feet (4)

heptameter - seven feet (13)

trimeter - three feet (6)

octameter - eight feet (14)

tetrameter - four feet (8)

nonameter - nine feet (15)

pentameter - five feet (10)

decameter - ten feet (16)

Lines can also end up with an odd number of beats/syllables.

Feet

Foot/feet: a group of stressed (/) and unstressed (u) beats/syllables in a line.

Here are some of the different feet, or different groups.

iamb - unstressed stressed (u /) ex: toDAY

trochee - stressed unstressed (/ u) ex: BADger

pyrrhus - unstressed unstressed (u u) ex: to the, like “GO to the HOUSE”

spondee - stressed stressed (/ /) ex: DOWNTOWN

anapest - unstressed unstressed stressed (u u /) ex: underSTAND

dactyl - stressed unstressed unstressed (/ u u) ex: ELephant

amphibrach - unstressed stressed unstressed (u / u) ex: toGether

amphimacer - stressed unstressed stressed (/ u /) ex: RUNaway

Iambic Pentameter (Cont'd)

Reading lines out loud can help you figure out the rhythm and the meter, which can help you figure out what Shakespeare means. Take this line:

HAMLET: *Alas! poor Yorick. I knew him, Horatio*

How many beats do you count? 12, right?

Instead of **pentameter**, this line's in **hexameter**—6 (hexa) instead of 5.

And see how it sounds if you try to say it like this:

u / u / u / u / u / u /
a**LAS!** poor **YOR**ick. I knew **HIM**, Hor**ATI**O

It doesn't sound that crazy, but "I knew **HIM**" sounds a little weird, right?

The other reason rhythm is important in Shakespeare is because it can help us figure out what a character means. That's why "I knew **HIM**" sounds weird, right? What would Hamlet mean by saying it that way?

Try saying it this way:

u / / / u u / u u / u u
a**LAS!** **POOR** **YOR**ick. I **KNEW** him, Ho**RATI**O

"Poor" is important to the sentence, right? Imagine if Hamlet said: "Alas! Stupid Yorick. I knew him, Horatio." That would be a very different opinion of Yorick. So "poor" lets us know that Hamlet feels sympathy for Yorick, while "I **KNEW** him" lets us know that Yorick wasn't a stranger, but someone Hamlet, well, knew!

Read these two versions out loud. Which one makes more sense, 1 or 2?

#1 u / u / u / u / u / u
It **IS** the **EAST**, and **JULI**ET is **THE** sun.

#2 u u u / u / u / u u /
It is the **EAST**, and **JULI**ET is the **SUN**.

Elizabeth Lingo Exercise

After reviewing basic Elizabethan words like thine/thou, have students partner up. Give them a simple conversation and have them replace modern words with Elizabethan ones.

Sample conversation:

- 1: Would you please pass the turkey?
 2: Why? Can you not reach it?
 1: No, not from here. It's right there, next to you.
 2: I definitely will want some more.
 1: But do you need it right now? Surely you can pass it.
 2: Mm, soon. Not right now.
 1: Are you done with it yet?
 2: No, I told you!
 1: Curses on you! Get you away from my table!

After they've had time to replace the words, get a few volunteer pairs to come up and perform their conversation. They can write their own conversations if they're really into it.

Alternatively...

As a homework assignment, have students find a selection of text on their own—like a famous speech or an interview, etc.—and replace common words with Elizabethan ones. The same in-class performance can apply.

Bonus Activity:

See if the kids can replace common words with Elizabethan ones in class for the whole period! "Canst I hence to the bathroom?"

Iambic Pentameter/Rhythm Exercises

Vocalizing & Clapping Rhythm

As a class, vocalize iambic pentameter together.

"da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM da-DUM!"

Or slap your thigh for unstressed syllables and clap your hands for stressed syllables in unison.

Repeat as many times as necessary.

Scan Text Selections

Let the students choose from 4 pieces of Shakespearean text. Give them a few minutes to scan for rhythm and meaning, then have volunteers come up to give a Shakespearean performance. (See sample text selections on next page.)

Write Your Own Sonnet

14 lines with 10 syllables in every line. For a basic assignment, students do not have to rhyme. For a more advanced class, have them stick to a standard sonnet rhyme scheme with an ending couplet. Have volunteers read aloud.

You can give them a starting line in iambic pentameter to help them out, like:

My favorite thing to do in summer is...

Speak in Iambic Pentameter

Have them talk about homework or what they did over the weekend in iambic pentameter. Turn it into a game—you're out if you don't use it correctly, last person speaking wins!

Sample Text Selection

To be, or not to be: that is the question:
 Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
 The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
 Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
 And by opposing end them?

Hamlet, Act III scene i

O Romeo, Romeo! wherefore art thou Romeo?
 Deny thy father and refuse thy name;
 Or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love,
 And I'll no longer be a capulet.

Romeo and Juliet, Act II scene ii

Am I so round with you as you with me,
 That like a football you do spurn me thus?
 You spurn me hence, and he will spurn me hither:
 If I last in this service, you must case me in leather.

Comedy of Errors, Act II scene i

Die, perish! Might but my bending down
 Reprieve thee from thy fate, it should proceed:
 I'll pray a thousand prayers for thy death,
 No word to save thee.

Measure for Measure, Act III scene i