

GENERAL SHAKESPEARE STUDY GUIDE

1. Minimal preparation: Read the play through once, just for the story, not worrying too much about keeping all the names straight or reading all the footnotes. Then go back a second time to clarify the details of the action and the language. Ideally you should read it again, as often as you can, and certainly any portion you want to write about. The way to understand how Shakespeare works is to get him into your blood.
2. Work through the study guides. You don't have to submit written "answers" to me, but you should think carefully about all the specific points raised in the guides. You might want to jot down a few notes on each question. Be ready to discuss the topics in the study guides in class.
3. Stage the play in your mind as you read it, thinking about the character's placement and movement, their tone of voice and the emotional "subtext" of their lines, their facial expressions and gestures. Think about the characters who aren't speaking: what are they doing? Notice the sounds an audience would hear (like clocks striking), and so on.
4. Think about whole shape of the story told, the experience conveyed by the play. One way — not the only way — to characterize a story is to locate the main goal or motive of the main character and the primary obstacle or conflict encountered in working toward it. Another way is to find the scene or part of a scene that epitomizes the action of each Act. Or to find a single line that epitomizes each Act.
5. Examine the actual sequence of events on stage, which we might call the "narrative sequence." Notice the choices Shakespeare makes in deciding which incidents to stage and which to leave unstaged. Notice the exact order in which the events take place, the juxtapositions of different actions (for instance, Petruchio's bargain with Baptista gets interrupted by Hortensio's entrance "with his head broke"). Notice other authorial decisions; for example, why does Shakespeare introduce Katharine before Petruchio? Why does he keep the marriage off stage?
6. Describe the play's language: is it primarily in verse or in prose? Are there many end-stopped lines? Rhymed lines? Is the language lyrical? Plain? Harsh? What are the important recurring words and images?
7. Describe the "world" of the play. Notice the specific locales it includes or frequently alludes to (streets, gardens, shops, churches, jails, and so on), the kind of people, occupations, values and activities found there, the sort of objects surrounding the characters, the presence or absence of "nature," and so on.
8. Look for contradictions: between characters, between what characters say and what they do, between overt and covert expectations or assumptions (for example, about how women behave), between our own expectations and what actually happens, and so on. What do you make of these?