

Reading Shakespeare is a skill anyone can learn. As with most skills — driving a car, juggling, French kissing — anyone interested can learn the basics fairly quickly, but true mastery requires dedication and practice. Here's a method to help you improve your Shakespeare reading skills.

In brief, the method is this: Read a Shakespeare play three times. Once quickly to get the gist of it. Once again slowly to more fully understand it. And once more to fully enjoy it.

### **Do a Read-Through**

Read through the play quickly in big chunks. If you can, set aside two or three hours to read the play through in one sitting, but at least read through each Act in one sitting.

Read for the story. Don't worry about keeping all the names straight or checking every footnote. Read the play sentence by sentence, not line by line; focus on subjects and verbs.

You can read along with an audio recording of the play or simply read the play aloud, but make sure you're *hearing* the play as you read it.

After this read through, you should be able to give a brief, accurate *summary* of what happens in the play and who the main characters are.

### **Workshop the Play**

Reread the play slowly in small bits. Every time you come to something you don't understand, stop and try to figure it out. (See the checklist below.)

Approach the play like an actor in rehearsal. Actors need to know what the characters are saying (what the words mean), where they're saying it (the blocking of the scene), who they're saying it to (the characters and their relationships), and, most importantly, *why* they're saying it (the motivations and emotions of each character and their conflicts with the other characters and within themselves).

Working through a play this way requires concentration, so don't try to read too much at once; take frequent breaks, stay fresh and alert.

After workshoping the text, you should have a list of *unanswered questions* about particular moments in the play: words, lines, metaphors, motivations, and so on that still puzzle you. Bring those questions to class.

### **Final Run-Through**

Now read the play through once more. This reading should greatly enhance your enjoyment and understanding of the play. Since you know what's going on and what the characters are saying, you can appreciate the play much more than you could at first. You'll also notice things you never noticed before: new connections in the language, parallels between plots and subplots, subtleties of character motivation, and so on.

After this run-through, you should have a list of *things you like* in the play: favorite lines and speeches, favorite scenes, favorite characters, favorite moments, and so on.

## READING SHAKESPEARE: A CHECKLIST

---

1. Make sure you understand the **vocabulary**. The footnotes will tell you what most of the strange words mean. If you find a strange word not glossed in your edition, look it up at [shakspeareswords.com](http://shakspeareswords.com) or in the Oxford English Dictionary.
2. What **mode** are the lines in? Are they in blank verse? prose? tetrameter couplets? Why did Shakespeare write these lines in this form? Pay particular attention to shifts from one mode to another.
3. How does Shakespeare use the **verse form** expressively? Are the lines end stopped or enjambed? Is the rhythm smooth or jagged? Are there any short or shared verse lines? Think about what clues the verse gives an actor about how to deliver their lines.
4. When and why does Shakespeare employ **wordplay**? Be on the lookout for double meanings, ironies, ambiguities, and bawdy puns.
5. How does Shakespeare use **figurative language**? What metaphors, similes, or analogies stand out to you? What does the metaphor literally describe (its *tenor*)? What analogy does the metaphor use to describe it (its *vehicle*)? What are the connotations and implications of the analogy?
6. Poetry depends on **repetition**, so look for repetitions: repetition of sounds, of words, of images, of concepts, parallel structures, antitheses, and so on.
7. Try to imagine a **performance** of the play in an Elizabethan playhouse. Pay attention to actual **stage directions** and to any implicit stage directions that appear in the dialogue. Think about the actors' placement and movement on the stage, their tone of voice and the emotional "subtext" of their lines, their facial expressions and gestures. Think about the actors on stage who aren't speaking: what are they doing? Notice the sounds an audience would hear (like clocks chiming or thunder rumbling or trumpets blaring).
8. It may help to **cast** the play in your mind and to consider how casting could affect the play. (*A Hamlet* starring Robert Downey, Jr. is very different from one starring Orlando Bloom or Benedict Cumberbatch.)
9. Consider the **status** of each character in the scene and the **relationships** among them. Do the relationships or status change during the scene? Ask yourself: "Who's running this scene?" (and also perhaps: "Who *thinks* they're running this scene?").
10. One clue to status and relationships among characters is in the **pronoun forms**. Do characters address each other as *you* or as *thou*? Do they shift from one form of address to another? Why?
11. Drama depends entirely on **conflict**, so look for conflicts: conflicts among the characters, within the characters, between what the characters (and the audience) expect to happen and what actually happens, between what characters say and what they do, and so on.