YORK NOTES

Top Ten Tips

Studying SHAKESPEARE

TOP TIP 1

Read the play!

Whichever Shakespeare play you're studying, the starting point is to read it! Sacrificing a few hours of your time to **read the play for yourself** is the best way to get familiar with the main events and ideas.

Whilst reading, **highlight** your **favourite moments/lines** and anything that really **stands out for you**. Doing this means that you are **interacting critically with the text**, which will serve you well when you come to study the play more closely.

TOP TIP 2

Shakespearean language

Shakespeare's language can be daunting! The idea is not to understand absolutely everything you read, but to focus on **key passages** and the **way that the play is written** so you can get the most out of it.

Knowing the **plot** and the **characters** inside out is important, too. When tackling a difficult piece of **language** it can be helpful to think about **who** is saying it and **why**.

TOP TIP 3

Setting of the plays

Consider the fact that Shakespeare does not always set his plays in **England**.

- ✓ ***Romeo and Juliet*** is set in Verona.
- ✓ ***Macbeth***: Scotland.
- ✓ ***The Merchant of Venice***: Venice.
- ✓ ***Julius Caesar***: Rome.

Ask yourself **why** he chooses overseas locations. For example, a common English conception of Italy was a place full of feuds and passionate love affairs. However, how **Italian** is ***Romeo and Juliet***, really?

The same question could be asked of Shakespeare's other plays. Are they ever convincing portrayals of different cultures and societies or are they simple **representations** of **ideas and attitudes** that would be found in **Elizabethan England**?

TOP TIP 4

Writing about form and language

Do you know the difference between **soliloquy** and **monologue**? What's a **sonnet**? Do you know what **blank verse** is? What are **rhyming couplets**? To effectively comment on **Shakespeare's use of language**, make sure that you:

- ✓ use **correct terminology**;
- ✓ **show understanding of why** Shakespeare opts for these different forms and techniques;
- ✓ comment on their **effect**.

To get you started, you'll find below some key techniques with definitions and examples explained. Try to find examples for other key terms that you need to know!

REMEMBER: When writing about Shakespeare's language, always ask yourself **why** he uses certain devices and **what** effect they have.

TOP TIP 5

Blank verse

Technically speaking, blank verse consists of **unrhymed iambic pentameter: a line of five iambs** (see TIP 6: Iambic pentameter). Simply put, this means lines with 10 syllables, 5 of which are stressed, with no rhyme at the end. For example:

'When ***now*** / I ***think*** / you ***can*** / be***hold*** / such ***sights***' (***Macbeth***, III.4.113)

Blank verse is **flexible**: Shakespeare uses the above **basic pattern**, but often varies it. For example, to capture the **sound of speech**, he changes the length and rhythm of lines.

REMEMBER: Shakespeare often uses **blank verse** when he wants to **convey the intensity** of characters' feelings.

TOP TIP 6

Iambic pentameter

An **iamb** is the most common '**metrical foot**', which basically means how the **stress** falls in a line (or even more crudely, the **rhythm** of a line). An **iamb** consists of a **weak stress** followed by a **strong stress**: think 'ti-**tum**'.

Pentameter simply refers to the length of the line, so, in this case, **five 'metrical feet'** (**pent** = five). So, put together, all **iambic pentameter** means is a line consisting of five iambs: (ti-**tum** / ti-**tum** / ti-**tum** / ti-**tum** / ti-**tum**).

For example:

'But, ***soft***! / what ***light*** / through ***yon-*** / der ***win-*** / dow ***breaks?***' (***Romeo and Juliet***, II.2.2)

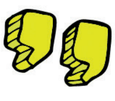
Iambic pentameter is the **closest** to the natural rhythm of spoken English. It's very **flexible**, but an **overuse** of can feel **mechanical**, which is why Shakespeare varies the form of his language.

TOP TIP 7

Soliloquy

A **soliloquy** is a speech made by a character when he/she is on stage **alone**, exploring his/her feelings. ***Hamlet's*** '**To be or not to be …**' speech is one of the most famous soliloquies in literature.

Soliloquies give characters the opportunity to **explore their thoughts and feelings aloud**, without the pressure of other characters' opinions/views/interjections. For the audience, it allows us an **insight** into a character's **internal struggles**, and increases the potential for **empathy** or **distrust** of a character.



Soliloquies can be key for creating **dramatic irony**. **Iago's soliloquies** in ***Othello*** are a great example – they convey his evil intentions to the **audience only**, while the other characters still view him as '*good, honest, Iago.*'

TOP TIP 8

Monologue

Monologues are extended speeches which other characters are privy to, and which are sometimes addressed to the audience. For example, Shylock's speeches in ***The Merchant of Venice*** (III.1.49–61; IV.1.43–61), and Marc Antony's speech in ***Julius Caesar*** (III.2.70–104).

Monologues are usually **rhetorically impressive**, full of **powerful imagery** and **important messages**. Characters dominate the stage with their **reasoning/declarations of love/elaborate deceptions**, making monologues both **captivating** and **crucial** to your understanding of the **plot** and where the **action may be headed**. Look out for any **foreshadowing** of **tragic/comic outcomes** in these speeches.

REMEMBER: Monologues are often used to reinforce **dramatic irony** or to **reveal truths to other characters**, so they may mark a **turning-point** in the play.

TOP TIP 9

Rhymed verse

Simply put, lines of verse that rhyme! Often rhymed verse is made up of rhyming couplets, which are pairs of rhymed lines following the rhyme pattern AA, BB, CC. For example:

Macbeth:

'Eye of newt, and toe of frog, (A)
Wool of bat and tongue of dog. (A)
Adder's fork, and blind-worms sting, (B)
Lizards leg, and owlet's wing – (B)
For a charm of powerful trouble, (C)
Like a hell-broth, boil and bubble.' (C) (IV.1.12–19)

Rhyming couplets create a compelling and strong **rhythm**, which can prove effective when trying to reinforce certain ideas/concepts/feelings. They can be both **playful**, keeping the pace of a scene moving, but they can also be **deeply moving** and even **ominous**, thus **enhancing** the romance or tragedy of a scene/speech.

REMEMBER: Shakespeare often uses **rhyming couplets** to close a scene; a kind of poetic flourish, if you will!

TOP TIP 10

Key themes

Depending on the play that you are studying, you will need to identify and familiarise yourself with its **key themes**. Draw a spider-diagram for each theme, noting any **links between them**. Here are some ideas to help you:

- ✓ In ***Macbeth***, is there a link between the theme of **Ambition** and the downfall of characters such as Lady Macbeth?
- ✓ In ***Romeo and Juliet***, can you break down the umbrella term of **Love** into different kinds of **love** (courtly, sexual and true love)? How do these different portrayals of love interact? How does the theme of a **warring society** conflict with the theme of **love**?
- ✓ In ***The Merchant of Venice***, consider how **Justice and mercy** is closely related with the theme of **Money**. Does **money** corrupt? Is **justice** done at the end of the play?
- ✓ In ***Julius Caesar***, look at the relationship between **Rhetoric** and **Political power.** How is power shown to lead to **corruption**; and does this affect **loyalty**?

Now it's your turn!

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