

myShakespeare's

Hamlet

Curriculum Guide





Table of Contents

Tips and Tricks for Teaching <i>Hamlet</i>.....	3
In-Class Activities and Ideas.....	4
Act-by-Act Resources.....	7
Culminating Essays and Projects.....	13



Tips and Tricks for Teaching *Hamlet*

In the Beginning...

Poll the Class

- What do you know about Shakespeare? When did he live and what was his world like? What are some of the plays you have read or heard of?
- Have you seen any of Shakespeare's plays performed? Have you seen any film versions or adaptations of Shakespeare's plays (i.e. Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet*, *10 Things I Hate About You*, etc.)? Have you ever performed anything written by Shakespeare?
- What do you know about Shakespeare's language? Are iambic pentameter, prose, and verse familiar or unfamiliar terms? Do you know any famous quotes from Shakespeare? If so, what do you think they mean?
- What do you know about *Hamlet*? Any famous lines? Plot points? Characters? Where is it set, and when? What are some themes of *Hamlet*?
- What are your anxieties about Shakespeare? Is there anything that has confused you in past attempts to study Shakespeare? Is there anything that you're dreading as you embark on *Hamlet*?

Play Around with the Text: A Sneaky Shakespeare Exercise

- Distribute the first 11 lines of dialogue in *Hamlet* to students. Work through the text as a class to unlock any unfamiliar phrases.
- Divide the class in half, into a "Team Bernardo" and "Team Francisco." Have students select from a pile of index cards listing "secret styles," such as horror, western, detective, opera, soap opera, sit-com, musical, farce, and so on.
- Have the class exchange dialogue in this style, either as a group or student-by-student down the line. Encourage students to go big—this is Shakespeare!
- At the end of the exercise, re-group and have students guess Shakespeare's intended setting and style for the scene. Perform the scene in this style.

Pre-Detecting: Interpreting Key Lines out of Context

- Distribute a worksheet of 5-8 key lines from Act 1 of *Hamlet*.
- Read each line aloud. Who do you imagine is speaking the line—a man or woman, someone old or young, powerful or weak, good or evil? Human or supernatural? To whom (or what) is he or she speaking? Have students write their ideas under each quote.



Throughout the Play...

Weird Word Log

- Select ten archaic or unusual words from your students' first reading assignment and have students guess meanings, first by the word alone, then by interpreting it in context.
- Have students create a Weird Word Log to keep track of unusual words as they continue to work through the play. For each word, students may wish to write a definition or synonym and write and illustrate a sentence of their own that employs the word.

Character Bookmarks

- Distribute index cards to students, along with copies of the Dramatis Personae.
- Discuss the cast list with your students, with an eye towards relationships and social status.
- Then have students depict the characters on their bookmarks based on what they've inferred from the Dramatis Personae.
- On the back, students can list character traits as they learn them, and continue to use these cards as a reference throughout the play.
- Remind your students that they can view the character blurbs for each scene, which might help them deduce what's important for each character as they move through the play.

In-Class Activities and Ideas

The following are brief overviews of general exercises that may enhance your students' experience. They can be adapted for use at any point in the play, depending on your curricular needs.

Staging Hamlet

As your students work through the play, ask them to generate ideas for staging the particular sections of the text you're reading. Some reliably interesting moments include

- Claudius's speech to Denmark and Hamlet's reaction
- Hamlet's first soliloquy
- Hamlet's encounter with the Ghost
- Hamlet's "To be or not to be" soliloquy
- The Mousetrap performance
- Ophelia's madness
- The graveyard scene



- [The duel between Hamlet and Laertes](#)

Once you've generated some ideas, show your students the corresponding scene from myShakespeare (at the links above). Use the following questions as a guide:

- Do certain staging ideas suggest different emphases? Different points of view? Different moods or atmospheres?
- What is conveyed by the staging ideas you have generated and by the film representation you have seen?
- Do you feel that some scenes can be dramatized more effectively through one medium or the other?

NOTE: This exercise can be easily expanded into a filmmaking or performance exercise using the same section of text (see Culminating Essays and Projects). You may also consider dramatizing moments that occur off-stage, such as the pirate attack, King Hamlet's funeral, the Royal Wedding, and action that occurs after the play's conclusion.

How Do Actors Convey Meaning and Tone?

The following activity is adapted from Reading Shakespeare with Young Adults by Mary Ellen Dakin.

Distribute copies of a famous speech from the play to students. Some suggestions include

- Hamlet's soliloquies ([1.2](#), [2.2](#), [3.1](#), [3.3](#), [4.4](#))
- [Polonius' advice to Laertes](#)
- [Claudius' "O my offense is rank" speech](#)
- [Ophelia's mad speech](#)
- [Gertrude's "There is a willow grows aslant a brook" speech](#)

First, have the students highlight words and phrases that appeal to any of the five senses—sight, sound, smell, taste, or touch. Then, have them underline and label examples of personification. Finally, ask your students to read the passage aloud. Once your students have completed these steps, discuss the following questions:

- How does the passage sound? Do you hear a rhythm? Are the words soft and musical, or harsh and discordant?
- What is the mood of this speech? how do the imagery and personification contribute to the mood?

After the discussion, screen the corresponding myShakespeare scene (at the links above) for your students, asking them to keep in mind their earlier conclusions about the speech. Once they've viewed the scene, your students should discuss the following questions:



- How does the actor use his or her voice as a performance tool? What kinds of choices in the sounds of their voices are the actors making, and how do those choices affect the meaning of the text?
- How else does the actor add meaning and emotion to the words? How does he or she use gestures, facial expressions, body language, and movement to enrich the words?
- How do the camera shots and angles contribute to the drama of the scene?

You Be the Host

With this exercise, your students will have the chance to step into Ralph's shoes. First have your students view a few examples of our character interviews for scenes they've already ready.

Then, have them choose a scene that might make for an interesting interview. You might have them choose a scene that does not feature a myShakespeare interview, or to interview a character who doesn't get as much interview time in the hot seat. Some options include

- [Act 1, Scene 3](#) (Polonius Gives Advice)
- [Act 4, Scenes 1-3](#)
- Horatio
- Rosencrantz and Guildenstern

First, students should draft a set of questions to ask the character. They should consider

- How the character might be feeling in this scene?
- What does the character want at this point in the play?
- What might the character be hiding, and how can Ralph get them to reveal it?
- What thematic kinds of questions could Ralph ask to help a viewer better understand the play?

Once your students have drafted scripts, the options are endless. They can stage a live interview for the class, film it studio-style, or even create podcast radio interviews.

Musically Speaking

Each act of myShakespeare's *Hamlet* ends with a song summary. These can provide inspiration as you have your students write and perform their own musical interpretations of the play. This activity can be as simple and quick as jotting down a few lyrics, or something more involved and long-term, like filming a music video. No matter which iteration you choose, in song, students can

- summarize acts or scenes of the play
- write a love song for one of the play's romantic pairings
- write a ballad by the Ghost from beyond the grave
- write a battle song for Fortinbras



Act-by-Act Resources

Act I

Discussion Questions and Writing Prompts

For each act, many of the discussion questions and writing prompts are the subject of our character interviews, so we recommend showing students the interviews as preparation. The questions begin as brief, basic discussion questions for in-class conversation or short writing assignments, and build to more complex questions for deeper discussions or longer essays. Each prompt is designed to be adaptable for your classroom needs.

A Few Basic Questions...

- Why doesn't Prince Hamlet inherit his father's throne?
- How long has it been since Hamlet's father's death?
- Does Hamlet resent the fact that he's not king?
- Is Hamlet suffering from depression?
- Is following the ghost reckless or logical?

Digging Deeper...

Polonius's Advice

Review Laertes' advice to Ophelia and Polonius' advice to Laertes (What is the advice being given? How good is it? Are there any contradictions in it?)

Ophelia's Advice

Step into Ophelia's shoes for a moment? What might she say to her father and brother? Write Ophelia's advice to Laertes or Ophelia's advice to Polonius. How would Ophelia advise Laertes to be a better brother and role model? How would Polonius' daughter advise her father to behave towards her and Laertes?

Your Advice

Using Polonius' speech as a model, write advice to a new student at your school. How do you navigate the social scene? What foods should you avoid in the cafeteria? Example: "Neither a slacker nor an overachiever be..."

Hamlet and the Ghost

Review Hamlet's conversation with the ghost of his father, King Hamlet. What does Hamlet learn from the ghost, and what is the impact of these revelations?



Revenge

King Hamlet tells his son that he shall be bound to avenge his murder when he hears of it. Does Prince Hamlet believe he has a moral obligation to kill Claudius? Consider King Hamlet's description of his own torments (hell, or purgatory?), and his desire that his wife Gertrude be left "to heaven." Consider Hamlet's references to hell and heaven in his own speech. By killing Claudius, does Hamlet believe he would doom himself to hell? "Self-slaughter is a mortal sin," Hamlet tells Ralph. For Hamlet, is revenge a mortal sin—or a moral necessity?

Act II

Discussion Questions and Writing Prompts

A Few Basic Questions...

- Is Hamlet's visit to Ophelia lovesickness, cruelty, or strategy?
- How will it help Hamlet if everyone thinks he's crazy?
- Is Hamlet's existential crisis getting in the way of revenge?
- Have the players revived Hamlet's plan for revenge?
- Why can't Hamlet take action?
- Is Hamlet beginning to doubt the ghost—and can ghosts be trusted?

Digging Deeper...

Hamlet on the Couch

Hamlet paid a silent visit to Ophelia which Ophelia struggled to decipher. Since Hamlet won't spill his feelings to her or to Ralph, see if he'll reveal them to a therapist: put Hamlet on the couch! The therapist might ask Hamlet to talk about his past relationships, his current feelings towards Ophelia, his dreams—be creative, and see what you can uncover about Hamlet's behavior in Ophelia's room. Was he trying to say something in code? What are his priorities right now, and where does Ophelia come into his plans? Draw upon Hamlet's two soliloquies in Act 2, as well as our myShakespeare performances to deduce his emotional state. Then write a 1-2 page script and perform in front of the class.

Ophelia's Status

Review the conversation between Ophelia and Sarah Siddons in which Ophelia concludes that "guys are just so hard to read." Reflect on the pressure Ophelia has received from both her father and her brother. As a class, discuss Ophelia's status within the social hierarchy of the Danish court and within her family. What is her status compared to Hamlet's?

Dear Diary

After speaking with Sarah Siddons and feeding the ducks with her father, Ophelia returns to her bedroom to sort out her feelings for Hamlet. Free- write Ophelia's diary entry. She might be thinking about the love letters she received from Hamlet, about her feelings towards her father for



making her return these letters, about her practical prospects for marriage with someone above her rank, about her brother's absence when he could provide advice...

Storyboarding Soliloquies

Review Hamlet's two monologues in Act 2: "What a piece of work is man" and "What a rogue and peasant slave am I." Students create a "storyboard" for a section of either the "What a piece of work is man" or the "rogue and peasant slave" speech. Have students select lines to illustrate, then draw 10-20 successive images creating a short film sequence for these lines, paying particular attention to metaphors and imagery. For example, in the first monologue, students could draw a wide-shot of the "majestical roof" followed by a close-up of the "golden fire" followed by a shot of Hamlet looking at the scene and making no sense of it. The more specific images you can come up with, the better!

Act III

Discussion Questions and Writing Prompts

A Few Basic Questions...

- Are Hamlet and Ophelia a couple, or not?
- Who's been mistreated, Ophelia, Hamlet, or both?
- Why would Hamlet tell Ophelia to "get thee to a nunnery"?
- Why can't Hamlet play his role as prince and son?
- Is Hamlet's love of the theater another way to avoid decisions?! -Is Hamlet finally ready to take action?
- Consider Claudius's predicament: can you be forgiven for your sins and still keep everything you gained by committing them?
- Why is Hamlet so willing to leave Denmark now?
- Why is Hamlet having these thoughts about the nature of war now?
Does Gertrude know anything about Claudius' current plans?

Digging Deeper...

"To be or not to be"

Review Hamlet's "To be or not to be" soliloquy. This famous monologue more well-known than understood. Getting students to appreciate its complexity is not easy, so this activity is meant to slow them down and identify each of Hamlet's thoughts. Distribute triple-spaced copies of the soliloquy. Encourage students to replace every word or almost every word with a word that serves the same grammatical purpose. Is there a logic to Hamlet's musings? How does each thought follow the next? Allow your students to reinterpret the soliloquy, describing an actual choice that they are facing or have faced.



The Mousetrap

Review Hamlet's plan to entrap Claudius by inserting extra lines into a play (this begins at the end of the "rogue and peasant slave" monologue), as well as the performance of the "Mousetrap." How would you entrap Claudius, if the action were taking place today?

A Modern Mousetrap

Write a brief passage of lines to be inserted into something Claudius might watch. Be creative! How might you slip a "mousetrap" into Claudius's favorite soap opera or reality TV show? Into a *Star Trek* episode? Into a contemporary play that you enjoy? Select your own material, and write the inserted "mousetrap" content in this style, beginning and ending with the source material.

"Oh, my offense is rank"

Review Claudius's "Oh my offence is rank" speech. The monologue is a fascinating window into Claudius's thoughts, but it is also a compressed series of powerful reflections on remorse, forgiveness, and divine grace. In pencil, copy out each line of Claudius's speech on unlined paper. Select keywords from each line, preferably words that name ideas or emotions, and erase them. In their place, draw symbols for these words. Think of creative ways to symbolize the words. Imaging the words in this way can help emphasize the emotional content of the speech and may alert you to words that hold multiple meanings. Have dictionaries on hand to illuminate unfamiliar words.

Act IV

Discussion Questions and Writing Prompts

A Few Basic Questions...

- Did Gertrude's involvement with Claudius start before King Hamlet's death?
- Did Gertrude know about or have anything to do with the murder itself?
- How did Gertrude know the details of Ophelia's death?
- Was Ophelia's death an accident, or suicide?

Digging Deeper...

Ophelia's Song

Review the scenes when we see Ophelia grieving and descending into madness. Why does Ophelia express herself primarily in song, rather than directly speaking her feelings?

Madness Monologue

Review Ophelia's dialogue with Gertrude and Claudius. Cut and re-paste Ophelia's lines in a new order to form a "madness monologue" to be performed. The goal is to apply extreme performance choices to the text to discover the range of what the text can convey. Students should consider playing with a variety of different choices on each line, varying pitch, volume, accents, and rate of



speech, and incorporating singing, physical actions, and other elements. Perform monologues outside or in a theater, if possible, to give students maximum freedom for exploration and expression.

Gertrude: Innocent or Guilty

Consider Gertrude's silence in her interview with Ralph after Claudius' departure. Review the discussion topics above and what Gertrude has said in previous scenes and come to your own conclusions about Gertrude's innocence or guilt in the crimes committed.

Gertrude's Secrets

Write Gertrude's inner monologue during her interview with Ralph. What would Gertrude be thinking after Claudius leaves and before Ralph speaks? What would be going through her head when she hears Ralph's first question? Feel free to expand the scene and add dialogue with Ralph if you would like to have Gertrude speak.

Whatever role you gave Gertrude in your first monologue (an innocent or an accomplice), reverse it. Write her inner monologue as if she had behaved in the opposite way from what you first concluded. Can you find evidence to support this view as well? How does this change the way you feel about Gertrude?

Act V

Discussion Questions and Writing Prompts

A Few Basic Questions...

- Are Hamlet's musings on death about his father or himself?
- Why does death remind Hamlet of Ophelia?
- Why does Hamlet decide to have Rosencrantz and Guildenstern killed?
- What is Laertes' problem with Hamlet?
- Does Laertes feel conflicted about killing Hamlet?

Digging Deeper...

Tragedy?

When Ralph prepares to conclude "*The Tragedy of Prince Hamlet*," Hamlet replies, alarmed, "Tragedy?!" Why is *Hamlet* a tragedy? Does it need to end this way? Could the play be resolved differently? How would a different conclusion change the meaning of the play?

Hamlet Redux

What events would need to be changed to have made the play resolve happily for Hamlet? For Rosencrantz and Guildenstern? For Ophelia? For Polonius? For others? Trace linked events. Can you spot any "chain reactions" in the play, events that caused a series of other events to take place?



Hamlet's Strategies

In the interviews, we frequently see Hamlet working on his strategy in his notebook. Create two one-page documents: the first, a depiction of what actually unfolds in the script (from Hamlet's encounter with the ghost through the end of the play); the second, an alternate strategy for Hamlet that might have changed the play's course. For example, in Hamlet's alternate strategy, he might have planned a dinner date with Ophelia when he could comfort her and gain her help in brainstorming ideas. Feel free to use drawings, diagrams, or other creative tools to represent these strategies.

Hamlet in a Hurry

Trying to summarize a long and complex play is a difficult task. Summarizing is not only a good review exercise, but it also helps us to prioritize what is most important: how is plot related to the meaning of the play?

Reflection

Reflect on your experience reading *Hamlet* and watching myShakespeare's performances and interviews. Write a 1-2 page reaction paper. You may wish to respond to one or more questions from the following list:

- What moments in *Hamlet* resonated most strongly for you?
 - How did watching myShakespeare's *Hamlet* affect your experience of studying *Hamlet*?
 - Did the interviews make clear anything that you had missed in reading the text, or provide you with additional insight into characters' thoughts and motivations?
 - Were there moments when you wish Ralph had asked characters additional "tough questions"—and if so, what questions, to whom, and at what point? How did the actors' performances match or fail to match what you imagined of the roles when you read the text?
 - If you were creating myShakespeare's *Hamlet 2.0*, what would you keep, and what would you change?
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Culminating Essays and Projects

Thematic Essay

Below are a few prompts for essays that grapple with some of Hamlet's overarching themes. These prompts are designed to be open-ended and invite student interpretation of the play as a whole.

Hamlet's obsession with death permeates the whole play, from his grief over his father's passing, to his musings about what lies beyond death, to his "Alas, poor Yorick" speech. How does his attitude toward death change throughout the play? Does Hamlet arrive at any clear conclusions about the meaning and nature of death by the play's end?

Early on in the play, Hamlet hatches a plan to feign madness in order to implicate Claudius in his father's murder. His plan asks us as an audience to consider the nature of madness in the play as a whole. How do you believe *Hamlet* defines madness, and which characters exhibit this quality?

Gertrude and Ophelia are the lone female characters in this play. How do their male counterparts see them? What is the play's relationship to femininity, and in what ways does this relationship affect the plot of the play?

Performance Projects

By performing *Hamlet*, students can gain new insight into the play's themes and characters. Of course performance projects can go far beyond the standard group project, so we've listed a few different options you might consider as ways to cap off your class's *Hamlet* unit:

- Divide your class into groups and assign each group key scenes from the play to perform for the entire class. But here's the catch: each group must reinterpret the scene for a different setting: Ancient Greece, Victorian England, Communist Russia—whatever you can dream up.
- Have students script new combinations of characters and perform those scenes. What would Ophelia say to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern? What would happen if the Ghost haunted Polonius?
- Have students stage key scenes and film them cinema-style. Students can even edit them all together into a movie trailer for *Hamlet*. You can shake things up by assigning them different genres: *Hamlet* as a romantic drama, for example. Or *Hamlet* as an action flick, perhaps?
- If your class isn't a good fit for group projects, you can assign individual students monologues or soliloquies to perform. If the class can handle it, encourage some friendly competition by awarding a prize for the best performance at the end. Points can be awarded for accurate memorization, interesting interpretations, impressive costumes, etc.
- Get the entire school involved by having students perform live for everyone, or by screening filmed versions of their scenes. Faculty judges can review the scenes on the spot to add a live-show atmosphere.