

# Unlocking Shakespeare

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## Bio facts

- William Shakespeare
- Lived April 23, 1564- April 23, 1616 (died on 52nd birthday)
- Married at 18, had 3 children
- Moved to London, without his family, and became an actor around 1592
- Part of the Lord Chamberlain's Men, later called the King's Men
- Wrote most of his plays between 1589- 1613
- Wrote 37 plays, and 154 sonnets
- Regarded as the greatest writer of the English language

## Why is Shakespeare important today?

"Shakespeare remains vital because his plays present people and situations that we recognize today. His characters have an emotional reality that transcends time, and his plays depict familiar experiences, ranging from family squabbles to falling in love to war. The fact that his plays are performed and adapted around the world underscores the universal appeal of his storytelling." ([britannica.com](http://britannica.com))

No one has ever written of the human condition better than Shakespeare. His characters are feasts, full of life and complexities. Acting teachers are fond to say your work is never done on Shakespeare. You can always find more to mine- deeper meanings, clearer understanding and speaking of ideas, etc.

## Shakespeare's Writing Styles

Shakespeare wrote in prose and verse. While prose may use poetic language, it does not use a meter, or rhythm. The novels we read, plays, the language we use in daily life are all prose. Verse, however, does have a meter, a rhythm, like songs or nursery rhymes. Most often Shakespeare wrote in iambic pentameter. The foundation of iambic pentameter are multi-syllabic feet. A single foot consists of 2 syllables and is also called an iamb. "Penta" means 5, so pentameter calls for 5 of these iambic feet per verse line, therefore creating a 10-syllable verse line. The rhythm of an iambic foot is unstressed/stressed. A visual representation of these stresses is:

x	/	x = unstressed
da-DUM		/ = stressed

(see handout from "Speak the Speech!", by Silverbush and Plotkin)

### Getting inside Shakespeare's Words

You should approach a Shakespeare piece just as you would a contemporary piece. You still must answer the following questions:

- who are you talking to?
- what is the relationship?
- what are you talking about?
- what are you reacting to? (the moment before)
- what is your objective? (what do you want?)
- what is your obstacle? (what's standing in the way?)
- how are you going to obtain your objective? (actions/tactics/active verbs)
- what is at stake?
- what are the given circumstances? (place, time, occasion, etc.)

You must also look up **EVERY** word, even if you believe you know what it means. Sometimes a common word uses a less common meaning in Shakespeare. Your job is to get into the marrow of your text, to have a deep understanding and connection to each word you say. "A major part of our work is being a detective. Each word is a clue. Each word is a specific verbal gesture. When Shakespeare wrote his plays and poems in the late 16th and early 17th centuries, he only meant **one** thing with each word or idiomatic expression. By using your lexicon, Google, dictionary, thesaurus, or any other means of preparation you can get very, very close to what Shakespeare meant to communicate. He is never vague or general. His language is as specific as your own when you are expressing love, honor, hate, fear, and the whole range of emotive sentiments that pour out of us when we are in action to change our circumstances. Acting is, in many ways, solitary work. For every hour of rehearsal, many more hours are needed to be prepared.

Don't settle for the *impression* of what you think is being said. Use all available tools and dig deep until you get to the heart of the matter."

*(About Our Work Together, written by Leslie Reidel)*