



Intro to Shakespeare – Syllabus

Course Description: The rockstar of his day, he wrote sitcoms, tragedies, teen romances, and history serials. He invented words, challenged conventions, and turned the entertainment world upside down—that’s right, we’re talking about William Shakespeare. Throughout this course, you’ll be introduced to Shakespeare’s stage and language, receive an overview of early modern England, and interact with three plays. Assignments will include formal literary analysis papers as well as pieces intentionally crafted to improve comprehension. *No prior experience with Shakespeare is necessary.*

Course Outline:

Week One: Who Was Shakespeare? (Overview, Context, Student Experience)

Week Two: How Do We Experience Shakespeare? (Speeches from *Julius Caesar*, Assorted Scenes, Etiquette for Attending a Shakespeare Play)

Week Three: Experiencing Comedies (*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*)

Week Four: Writing about Characters (*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*)

Week Five: Experiencing Tragedies (*Macbeth*)

Week Six: Writing about Plays (*Macbeth*)

Week Seven: Recovery after the Scottish Play (Selections from *The Tempest*)

Week Eight: Finals (Student-Selected from a Limited List—with Summaries!)

Grading Information: All assignments will be graded using *The Advanced Writer Rubric* and averaged to receive a final course grade.

Required Texts:

The student should have access to copies of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Macbeth*, *The Tempest*, and whatever fourth play the student selects.

There is no required edition; the student must simply cite the edition used, as different editions are based on different versions of Shakespeare's plays. However, **please do not use "modern English" translations or abridged copies of the plays, but instead choose edited copies in Elizabethan English** (e.g. the Norton Shakespeare)—we'll be working through how to understand Shakespeare's language.

If you would like an online copy, The Folger Shakespeare Library provides (as of July 2020) free digital editions with line numbers.

We recommend that students interact with the text (highlighting and marginal notes), but students are *not* required to own copies of the work—texts from the library are perfectly all right! If you would like to own, inexpensive copies can be found online and at used bookstores.

As students tend to experience stronger reading comprehension when not reading on a screen, we would highly recommend that students have access to a hard copy of the works (a printed out PDF works well, too!).

OPTIONS FOR THE FINAL STUDENT-SELECTED PLAY:

Below, we have compiled a list of the plays you can select for your final project, as well as a short summary of what you can expect from each play and its genre (comedy, tragedy, history).

Fellow Shakespeare nerds might notice that several plays are missing from the list. Why, you ask? As we've covered before, not all of Shakespeare's subject matter is fun for the whole family—some content is for major British history geeks, some is explicit, and some is just less comfortable for many people. Therefore, we are keeping this to a "pre-college" list of plays, so you can have fun exploring Shakespeare's canon without getting too deep into intense content.

OUR TOP RECOMMENDATIONS:

Uncertain about which to select? These plays are some of our favorites.

AS YOU LIKE IT. *Comedy.* “All the world’s a stage” (2.7.138) as two cousins embrace exile from their courtly home to join a band of nobility living in the Forest of Arden. One of the most iconic moments is when heroine Rosalind, dressed as a man for safety, meets with her love interest Orlando to “cure” Orlando of his love . . . for Rosalind.

HAMLET. *Tragedy.* Yes, it’s the one with the skull. This deeply-introspective play follows a young prince who is spurred to revenge when the ghost of his father claims that he was murdered by his brother, Hamlet’s uncle... who also married Hamlet’s mom. Awkward. The play is chock full of vengeance, madness, and bloodshed, as well as some of the most iconic speeches you’ve ever heard—although there is an awful lot of talking.

KING LEAR. *Tragedy.* If you like psychology and beautiful poetry, this is a good choice for you. *King Lear* looks on as the titular character slips into madness, his world slowly falling apart.

MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING. *Comedy.* This is a favorite of many high school students. It’s a bantering love story between a jaded war hero and a sassily strong lady, both of whom claim they can’t stand romantic love. Through twists, turns, and betrayals, the pair are tricked into falling for each other.

THE COMEDY OF ERRORS. *Comedy.* A short, slapstick play, *Comedy of Errors* watches the zaniness that ensues when two long-lost sets of twins are suddenly brought back together.

TWELFTH NIGHT. *Comedy.* This another twin comedy, this time with a more involved plot. After twins Sebastian and Viola were torn apart in a shipwreck, Viola must provide for herself by pretending to be a man—but ends up falling in love with the duke, her employer. As if that weren’t awkward enough, the duke’s crush Olivia (who is completely disinterested) falls for “Cesario,” Viola’s male alter ego. (Good thing Viola has a male twin, right? Basically the same thing.) There’s also a lovely cast of ridiculous side characters.

OTHER PLAYS:

Equally good plays, but harder to read or more cliché in the case of Romeo & Juliet.

LOVE'S LABOUR'S LOST. *Comedy.* This play is a close second with *Twelfth Night*. However, it's very complicated and comes together best live. It follows a king and his best buddies as they agree to give up romance in exchange for study . . . right before the beautiful Princess of France and her ladies arrive.

HENRY V. *History.* Containing some of Shakespeare's most iconic speeches, this play follows the titular Henry as he leads his troops to an unlikely conquest of France.

OTHELLO. *Tragedy.* Iago, one of Shakespeare's most despicable villains, cunningly turns the Moorish general Othello against his wife Desdemona. There's a lot to be said about race in this play.

ROMEO & JULIET. *Tragedy.* Spoiler alert: R&J is not a beautiful love story. It's a story of two teenagers who get infatuated with each other, make poor decisions, and cause a lot of bloodshed. Eek. At least there's positive societal change in the end. (*That*, of course, is my biased opinion—many readers and scholars love *R&J*! I am, unfortunately, not one of them. :)) On the plus side, there are a lot of iconic speeches and lines in the play . . . and some people do think it's romantic.

THE WINTER'S TALE. *Tragedy.* Known as one of Shakespeare's "problem plays" (plays with complex tone shifts—somewhat like a tragicomedy), *The Winter's Tale* begins as a dark psychological drama about a royal family and transitions into a pastoral, joyful comedy with a *lot* of shepherds.

Plays that you may select if you are a massive British history geek and don't mind a more dry piece: *We particularly love King Henry IV parts 1 and 2, but you can also read King John, Richard II, Henry VI, Parts 1-3, Richard III.*