

Some Ideas for Teachers

1. Technical Tip

One piece of technical advice. Because the materials are being more heavily used at the moment, the video will sometimes not play after a few pages of use. Don't panic — simply refresh or reload the web browser page (no need to log out and back in), and that will clear things up.

2. Scene Skimming

If you are pressed for time or find the going heavy, one approach some teachers take is to focus more intensively on fewer scenes, and simply explain the scenes verbally that are not covered. This is not a “correct” list, but one I have seen some teachers use:

Act 1 Scene 1

Establish main plot points and characters

Act 1 Scene 5

The ball where Romeo meets Juliet for the first time

Act 2 Scene 2

The balcony scene, where Romeo and Juliet “officially” fall in love

Act 3 Scene 1

A turning point with the death of Mercutio and Tybalt, and Romeo's banishment

Act 4 Scene 1

Friar Lawrence's gamble

Act 5 Scene 1

The unravelling - Paris dies, Romeo dies, Juliet dies, Lady Montague dies (off stage), Friar Lawrence explains, the families end their feud

3. Backing Into The Text

Another idea for getting students to dip their toe initially in Shakespeare, is to encourage them to read the single paragraph description of each page, before they read the original, or see the performance. It is the plainest, simplest summary of what is going on, and often makes the action and language much more easy to work through and understand.

4. Single Scene Deep Dive (Learning the Tools)

As an initial process, many teachers I have seen using WordPlay require their students to familiarize themselves with all the tools available to them. There are different approaches to doing this, but one that works well is to require students as a first exercise to choose a scene and do a deep dive - use every tab, and watch/use every link, read every translation, and answer every multiple choice question. This deep dive/familiarization process reminds the students of the tools they have at their disposal.

5. Group Work/Act or Scene Ownership

Teachers describe the sometimes painful, almost forensic nature of reading Shakespeare - one word, one sentence, one page, one scene at a time — it can sometimes be an excruciating process. One way to both ease this process and encourage greater involvement, is to assign scenes that you know or like to student syndicates or groups, and give them ownership (and responsibility) for learning the scene and all its aspects. They can then report in to the others members of the class on the meaning of the scene, and their analysis of the action, stagecraft and so on.

6. Comparing Performances

This technique occurs as much in the physical classroom as in the virtual classroom: giving students a scene, or part of a scene, and asking them to watch the WordPlay production (2015), the Zeffirelli production (1968), and the Thames production (1976) and then compare the three. Why do these three productions make the choices they do? Why are the Zeffirelli and Thames productions done in period costume? Does that make them intrinsically “better”? More “genuine”? Why does Zeffirelli cut certain parts? Does that make his production less “genuine” or “correct”? A good example of this is Act 1 Scene 1 - ask your students to watch the run up to the fist fight scene as well as the fight scene itself, and set them the task of noting down how many lines are cut (hint: a lot). Why does he do that? Does that make the production “bad” or “wrong”. As a nice little extra, (very few people know this) — Zeffirelli gives Tybalt dialogue which *sounds* very Shakespearian, but is absolutely invented out of thin air. Ask your students to find the line; (Here it is: “Now hie thee home, fragment”, and it comes in the middle of the fight scene. The best theory I have found about this extra line, is that Zeffirelli took it from Coriolanus (“Go get you home, you fragments” *Coriolanus* Act 1 Scene 1, Line 206.)

7. Character Review

There’s sufficient range in Shakespeare’s characterizations to sometimes confuse students. A popular one to explore is Lord Capulet, and the question of what sort of a father he is. It’s possible, particularly early in the play, to see him as a generous, indulgent, and even enlightened parent. Asking students to work through the play and study one character reveals that he becomes considerably less pleasant when his will is overruled. We see some of the pepper in his personality when he confronts Tybalt at the ball. Here are four moment where we can look at Lord Capulet in action:

1. Act 1 Scene 2 Page 26-27 Thoughtful, sensitive, but open to persuasion
2. Act 1 Scene 5 Page 50-51 Transition from peaceful to wrathful
3. Act 3 Scene 4 Page 135-136 Smug, and overbearing — and quite wrong.
4. Act 3 Scene 5 Page 145-148 Incredulous, then enraged, then outright terrifying

Other Thoughts/Snippets

Romeo and Juliet in 100 Words

Taking place in Verona Italy, Romeo and Juliet tells the story of two wealthy families (the Montagues and the Capulets), who for years, for some long forgotten reason, have hated each other. Romeo, a Montague, falls in love with Juliet, a Capulet. They secretly get married, but in a moment of anger, Romeo kills one of Juliet’s cousins (after that cousin kills Romeo’s best friend), and after a series of misunderstandings and missed opportunities, Romeo and Juliet each commit suicide. Only then, when the two families have each lost a treasured child, do they finally agree to end their feud.

Why is Shakespeare So Hard to Understand?

Students frequently complain that Shakespeare is too hard to read. Some students go further, and wonder *why* it’s so hard. Here are some reasons (but by no means all) reasons.

1. Shakespeare wrote his plays 450 years ago. As a thought experiment, think about how much language nowadays changes in the space of a year. New words, new phrases, new styles. Now multiply all the change that happens in just one year by 450 — you practically have a different language.

2. Shakespeare wrote plays, not novels, so reading his plays presents an immediate challenge — you’re reading a script meant for actors. That’s why we put a filmed performance on the page next to the text. But even then, the language is complex, and some of the vocabulary is archaic. Add in Shakespeare’s love for creating elaborate metaphors and indulging in wordplay (particularly puns and other kinds of *double entendres*) and things get even harder. (That’s why we add a series of other materials to help readers unpick and “re-enter” the text from different angles.)

3. Then there’s the matter of obscure contemporary references, things that people in Shakespeare’s era would have intuitively understood because it was part of their cultural landscape. An example from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* is the entire premise that there is a world of fairies and goblins out and about, blessing (or making mischief for) humans. It was a cultural touch point that such things existed, but it takes the modern reader a little time to accept that this is even remotely plausible.

4. A final, and quite intriguing idea, is that Shakespeare wrote to and for a primarily preliterate audience. Very few of Shakespeare’s audiences could read and write. It has been hypothesized that this made Elizabethans particularly good listeners, better at parsing spoken English and understanding spoken structural complexity. In the same way that some claim that audiences at the Lincoln Douglas debates were simply better trained to listen to lengthy and complex policy speeches (through practice and habit), so it has been suggested that what seems very complex to our ears, was simpler for Elizabethans to understand, because their brains were wired chiefly to the process of interpreting spoken language. By contrast, 21st Century readers are well versed in all sorts of media interpretation, potentially generalizing and thus making us less astute listeners.

The screenshot shows a web browser window with the address bar displaying 'wordplayshakespeare.com/#!/play/romeo&juliet/pages/3/1/3'. The page content includes Shakespeare's text from Romeo and Juliet, with a video player showing a performance of the scene. Red arrows and boxes highlight various interactive elements: 'Previous Page', 'Next Page', 'Word Play', 'Video Play Button', 'More' Button, and 'Scene Navigator'. The video player shows a man in a dark shirt and jeans, holding a sword. The 'Scene Navigator' at the bottom shows a list of scenes, with 'A3 S1' highlighted in red.

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