

Hamlet



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Timothy J. Duggan, Ed.D.

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Teaching Success Guide for the Advanced Placement Classroom



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Timothy J. Duggan, Ed.D.

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*For my mother, Toodie Duggan,
who has dedicated herself to the education
of her children and grandchildren.*

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“Who’s there?”: An Introduction

Welcome to the *Advanced Placement Classroom: Hamlet*.

Virtually everyone who has completed secondary school has had an experience with Shakespeare. His works (three or four of them, anyway) are part of the required curriculum in school districts across the country and in many parts of the world. Recognizing that Shakespeare is a common element in school curriculum is a good place for us to start thinking about how we will teach Shakespeare. We should first examine what our own high school (and perhaps middle school) experience with Shakespeare was like, so that we can start to understand two things: first, why we as individual teachers think and feel the way we do about Shakespeare and second, what information from our own experience of Shakespeare in school will inform our process for designing how our students will experience Shakespeare. Granted, our school experience, such as we are able to remember it, should not be the determining factor in our planning, but if we have had specific negative experiences or specific positive experiences, reflecting on them will allow us to recreate the positive and avoid the negative for our own students.

Unfortunately for many English teachers, their love of Shakespeare, assuming they do love Shakespeare, tends to come later, when they see a dynamic theatrical production or benefit from a stimulating professor in college. Reality for high school teachers is far different from that of college professors on a number of levels. When I addressed Shakespeare with my college students in the 1990s in Nebraska, we started with a conversation about what their knowledge of and experience with Shakespeare had been before coming to college. The stories they told of how Shakespeare was taught to them were sometimes inspiring, and other times they harrowed me with fear and wonder. Teachers, like doctors, should take



an oath that contains the Hippocratic maxim to avoid doing harm. In parentheses following that statement should come the phrase “especially when teaching Shakespeare.”

Everyone has to start somewhere. Robert Frost once said that poets have to start with insufficient knowledge, or else no one would write a poem until he was 50 years old. The same is true with teachers. We all start with deficits in our preparation, and one or two survey courses in Shakespeare are slim preparation to go into a classroom and teach *Hamlet* to teenagers.

John Dewey (1938) said that the best type of experience for a learner is that which leads the learner to seek a further, similar experience. Our job in teaching Shakespeare and in teaching *Hamlet* is to make an introduction and to guide the experience our students have with the text in such a way that will foster their desire to have another experience with Shakespeare. It is important to remember that making it easy or trying to make it fun will not work in this regard.

Your students will not love Shakespeare just because you do, and they certainly will not love his work if you groan through it yourself. On the other hand, they can grow to love the accomplishment that comes through close and often frustrating experiences reading and writing about a difficult text. Every time I hear a speaker or a teacher say that Shakespeare is “not difficult” and that students “can get it if they try,” I feel the tug of the millions of students who sit bored and confused in classrooms throughout the country and perhaps around the world. I have been reading, viewing, and enjoying Shakespeare for nearly 30 years, but it still poses difficulties for me when I sit to read it, and I still avail myself of the explanatory notes, even if I sometimes dispute them when they don’t make sense to me. As this book will demonstrate, reading the text as a script with clues for performance will help unlock meaning, as will exercising the many skills of analytical reading and writing at the core of language arts standards. Shakespeare is difficult, but rigor and challenge are what schools should be about, and Shakespeare, like certain other authors (Faulkner and Joyce come to mind), rewards our hard work with understanding.

Hamlet is a monolith of literature, and so teaching it can be a little like acting the part—intimidating. As Phillip Franks (1993), an actor who played the part for the Royal Shakespeare Company, said, “The weight of the past of the play is unbearable.” That weight can be unbearable for us as teachers, too, unless we look at Shakespeare as a challenge to be met, to prepare for, to invest ourselves in, and above all, to enjoy. At the heart of *Hamlet*, as in any play, is a story to tell. The play itself is concerned with storytelling. The ghost of Hamlet’s father tells Hamlet that, were he not forbidden to do so, he could tell Hamlet a story that would raise the hair on his neck. And yet, the story the ghost does tell Hamlet sets in motion the action of the play. At the end of the story, Horatio, who is the audience’s partner in witnessing Hamlet’s struggle, is given the task of telling Hamlet’s story, and



of reporting his cause “aright to the unsatisfied” (V, ii, 371–372). There’s a sense of purpose, of getting things right for posterity. As someone who knows the truth, Horatio must tell it to those who don’t know it, just as one who has seen the light outside Plato’s allegorical cave must be dragged back to enlighten those still in the dark. In a sense, we have the same mission as Horatio, to bring Hamlet’s story to our students, to report him and his cause “aright to the unsatisfied.”

To say that much has been written about *Hamlet* is a gross understatement. One cannot possibly sift through the volumes of criticism, analysis, and commentary, nor will doing so add a great deal to your arsenal in the secondary classroom. This is not to say that critical prose should be avoided (see Chapter 7 and Chapter 8 for discussions of critical sources), but I would recommend letting students first encounter the text of *Hamlet* with a fairly naïve stance as readers, unencumbered by predigested interpretations of others. Critical approaches can add to re-readings, discussions, and ultimately to performing scenes and writing in response to the play, but frontloading students with piles of information, even background information, can lessen interest and convince them that they are no match for the task of studying *Hamlet*. Just as GPS takes the adventure out of finding one’s way around with a map, so do pretaught interpretations take the adventure out of reading *Hamlet*. In such a situation, one is only looking for the road signs that the teacher and the critic have pointed out. My hope is that you will find useful and challenging activities here to guide and enhance your experience teaching *Hamlet* and your students’ experience reading the script, performing scenes from the script, and writing in response to the text. Ultimately, when students have arrived at their own interpretations of the script, they will venture into the world of *Hamlet* criticism, and this book should help you in your efforts to make that journey sensible for them.

For you as the teacher, creating a unit of study covering *Hamlet* is a little like mounting a production of the play. You have a number of decisions to make prior to starting, you hope things will go as planned, and you hope the outcome will be a phenomenal success. I believe teachers should create their own units with whatever tools they see fit to use, because you as teachers know your students, your curriculum standards, and the other pressures on your work life that allow or disallow certain options. As director of your students’ experience, you will first need to determine how much time you have to devote to *Hamlet*, and how you will fit it into your course of study. If you devote 5 weeks to the play, you will be able to take your students places that 3 weeks will not allow. If you are reading *Hamlet* within the context of an elective Shakespeare course, you will have options that you don’t have in a typical British Literature survey or AP class. As this book progresses, I occasionally will make reference to options for those who have less time in the curriculum and those who have more.



How to Use This Book

There are many, many discussion topics and classroom ideas in this book. Activities that involve students in work outside the classroom include a Student Activity Sheet (SAS) at the end of each chapter in the Chapter Materials, which you can modify as you please or give to your students as a set of instructions. Those activities that are teacher directed and that can be done in the classroom are explained in the chapters themselves, with no handouts. I believe that teachers like to design their own units of instruction because they know their students best, so I'm providing a method for addressing the text, and you can provide the schedule you will use, pick the assignments from this book that make sense to you, along with those you create yourself, and design the assessment parameters around the work produced. In descriptions of activities throughout the book, I specify what students may produce as a result of the activity, but it will be up to you to assess student progress based on your own parameters.

Chapters 4–7 form the core of this book. Read Chapter 4 with a text of *Hamlet* handy for reference, as the chapter will guide you through the reading process, scene by scene. Ideas from Chapters 5, 6, and 7 for discussion, performance, and writing reflect back on the text of *Hamlet*, assuming that you and your students will reexamine the text often following your initial reading. Use the activities that make sense to you, and pass over the ones you don't feel comfortable with. In a 3–5-week unit on *Hamlet*, you won't have time for everything here, but you should have a good variety of approaches that challenge your students and produce understanding on a number of levels.

I believe in student involvement, and Shakespeare demands it, through the relationship between a script, which is what we have in our hands, and a play, which is a theatrical experience. If this book makes nothing else clear, it should drive home the point that Shakespeare's works are scripts for actors. Although reading Shakespeare without thinking about performance can be pleasurable, indeed, reading the text as a set of instructions for actors will open up possibilities for you and your students that will bring the work to life. This book is written with the goal of getting you and your students to spend much of your time with *Hamlet* up on your feet, speaking the lines and moving around. Certainly, no approach to teaching anything is hegemonic, and you will find many alternative activities in this book that don't involve performance. My general method for teaching involves students in individual contemplation, group exploration, and whole-group sharing. I believe that as teachers we need to distribute our students' attention between the text, each other, and ourselves. We should bring something to the mix when we teach Shakespeare, which includes not only what we know of the work, but our willingness to become learners with our students. The kinds of thinking students do should alternate between receiving information, pro-



cessing information, and transmitting, through speech, writing, or action, their understanding.

Standards and Assessments

The activities in this book address virtually every standard put forth by the National Council of Teachers of English and the International Reading Association (1996), which are listed below.

NCTE/IRA Standards

1. Students read a wide range of print and nonprint texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.
2. Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.
3. Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).
4. Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.
5. Students employ a wide range of strategies as they write and use different writing process elements appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes.
6. Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and nonprint texts.
7. Students conduct research on issues and interests by generating ideas and questions, and by posing problems. They gather, evaluate, and synthesize data from a variety of sources (e.g., print and nonprint texts, artifacts, people) to communicate their discoveries in ways that suit their purpose and audience.



8. Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., libraries, databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.
9. Students develop an understanding of and respect for diversity in language use, patterns, and dialects across cultures, ethnic groups, geographic regions, and social roles.
10. Students whose first language is not English make use of their first language to develop competency in the English language arts and to develop understanding of content across the curriculum.
11. Students participate as knowledgeable, reflective, creative, and critical members of a variety of literacy communities.
12. Students use spoken, written, and visual language to accomplish their own purposes (e.g., for learning, enjoyment, persuasion, and the exchange of information).

State standards vary from state to state, but cover the broad areas above in more detail. You will want to design assessment of your students based upon your state standards and your goals. Here is not only a large volume of possible assignments for student learning, but also enough variety in the assignments to provide you with evidence needed to prove student learning. I do not, however, provide a test over *Hamlet*—only opportunities for active and reflective reading, discussion, group investigations, informal and formal performance, and creative projects. Enjoy.

“I shall the effect of this good lesson keep”: Teaching Shakespeare

Shakespeare stands at the center of the language arts literature curriculum in high schools for a number of reasons, and we are smart to revisit the reasons why we teach Shakespeare at any level. Especially now, with a multitude of new literacy forms and electronic means of communications, with stories told in contemporary books, films, television shows, and online networks, the dusty scripts of a playwright from Elizabethan England can appear a bit distant to the concerns of a 21st-century adolescent. But we do well to consider the permanence of Shakespeare's works through the past 400 years as testament that the works have been questioned before for relevance and found to have continued applicability to modern day. In his survey of the great works of Western literature, Harold Bloom (1994) placed Shakespeare square in the center of the canon, and argued that most of what has been written since owes something to the Bard of Avon.

On the other hand, to say that we should teach Shakespeare just because our predecessors have taught Shakespeare is not going to convince a skeptical student, nor should it. The work must stand on its own and endure the scrutiny of fresh, young eyes in order to survive. As mentioned in my introductory essay, we cannot and will not be able to “make” our students love Shakespeare or see its value just because we love it or see its value. What we can do is give Shakespeare a good chance by teaching his work well, and then let the chips fall where they may.

If you are skeptical about Shakespeare or have had a negative experience in school with Shakespeare's works, your biggest challenge when faced with the requirement to teach Shakespeare will be to get over your own fear or dread (or plain dislike) of the work in order to help your students approach the work with



open minds. In examining the value of Shakespeare in our curriculum, the following arguments may prove convincing, if not to your students, at least to yourself.

Reason 1: Shakespeare's Stories

It's almost cliché to say that Shakespeare's stories are universal. I am not exactly sure saying so will convince skeptical students who have not experienced a great deal in life, but if you just take the main conflicts of the stories and present them, they are compelling in their own right. For example, a boy from one family falls in love with a girl from a rival family, and they must keep their love secret to avoid all-out war between the families (*Romeo and Juliet*). Although it is the rare student who will be in a situation of serious and public family feuds, several will relate to falling for someone their parents don't approve of. Complicate the story by adding a mercurial friend on one side who likes to stir things up and a jealous cousin on the other side who likes to fight, then put those strong personalities together, and see what happens. There's your story.

Students like good stories. What about the young man who is supposed to be with his father the king, learning to become a worthy heir to the throne and behaving himself, but instead is hanging out with the wrong crowd and being corrupted by an older man in a tavern (*King Henry IV, Part 1*). When rebellion erupts and the young man must prove his worth, will he be ready? There's your story. The stories of Shakespeare resonate because the conflicts are real and they reveal real humans struggling with their insecurities and their human weaknesses. Shakespeare often found his stories or adapted stories his audience was already familiar with. *Hamlet* is an example of a story that Shakespeare's audience would be familiar with (more on that later), but that Shakespeare adapted and changed for his own purposes. We have the freedom to tell the stories to spark interest in Shakespeare for our students. With younger students, say middle school and younger, telling them the story before they encounter the script will help them address the script itself. I have told stories of Shakespeare to children of all ages, and they are more engaged, immediately, with the problems (conflicts) in the stories than they are with any other elements, including character, although character is what they eventually hold on to the longest. For example, I have told the following introduction many times:

An old king wants to retire, but still go on being called king. He has three daughters, and he intends to divide the kingdom equally between them. The king is vain, and before he divides the kingdom, he sets up a little contest with his daughters, by making them tell him how much they love him. He starts with his oldest daughter, and she says, "Oh, my father, my



love is dearer than eyesight, space, and liberty, beyond what can be valued, rich or rare. I love you more than child ever loved a parent.” She lays it on, and her father is pleased. “Very good,” he says, “you get this third, with rivers wide and forests, and pleasant farmland.” Then, he turns to his second daughter, and commands her to tell how much she loves him. “Oh,” she says, “I am just like my sister, and I love you just as she does, only I find she comes too short in proclaiming her love, for I am only happy in my love for you.”

“Very good,” the old king chuckles, “you can have this third of the kingdom,” he points to the map on the floor, “no less than what was given to your sister.”

Then he turns to his third daughter, who is his favorite. He has been saving the nicest third of his kingdom for her, and it is time for her to claim it by telling how much she loves him. And, she truly does love him, unlike her lying sisters, but she stands with her head down when he speaks to her, “Now my youngest, what can you say to draw a third more opulent than your sisters?”

“Nothing, my lord.”

“Nothing will come of nothing, speak again.” The king looks irritated.

“Nothing, my lord. I cannot heave my heart into my mouth like my sisters.”

The king grows angry at once, and says, “Mend thy tongue lest you mar your fortunes!” But the daughter stands silently, unwilling to lavish him with sweet testament of her love. He gives her one more chance and says, “So young and so untender?”

She replies, “So young, my lord, and true.”

“Fine,” he shouts, “Thy truth shall be thy dowry. I hereby disown you!” And he gives the other two sisters her third of the kingdom, casting his youngest daughter away.

By this point, the kids already are fastened to the story. How could the father king be so vain? Why didn’t the daughter speak up and receive her land? What are the other two false daughters going to do? What will happen to the youngest daughter? If kids decide to actually read the script of *King Lear*, they will have a struggle ahead, but knowing what they know of the story, and discovering the subplot of Gloucester and his sons, they will advance with an open mind and a desire to know what will happen.

Romeo and Juliet, *Henry IV, Part I*, and *King Lear* are just three of the many stories that Shakespeare tells through his medium of the stage. As mentioned in the opening chapter, we must always be reminded that Shakespeare’s scripts are



stories for the theatre, with everything that visual elements, music, movement and the sound of voices can provide to aid in the storytelling. *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *Othello*, and comedies such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It*, and *Measure for Measure* all have compelling stories to tell, and in some cases, such as *Hamlet*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *Macbeth*, these stories have become the archetypes of many stories told since. It is not a coincidence, for example, that Disney's *The Lion King* roughly follows the plot of *Hamlet*—it is a great plot to follow, full of complications, intrigue, and a heightened sense of drama as the story progresses. Nor is it a coincidence that so many recent film remakes of Shakespeare's works have been produced, even when they only loosely follow the originals. Examples include *O* for *Othello*, *Ten Things I Hate About You* for *Taming of the Shrew*, and *She's the Man* for *Twelfth Night*.

Reason Two: Script Reading and Reading Ability

It is not just the stories of Shakespeare that make his work worth teaching. The first concept to teach students regarding Shakespeare is that Shakespeare wrote scripts, not plays. Scripts are sets of instructions for directors and actors, from which they may develop plays, which are theatrical experiences including text, sound, and visuals. Reading the text of *Hamlet* as a set of instructions requires us to understand that the script contains clues or “signals” for actors. Signals can be stage directions in dialogue, such as when Egeus, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (I, i), tells Demetrius to “Stand forth” or when Julius Caesar says, “Then fall Caesar” (III, i). Other signals, however, are not so obvious and only can be teased out through the physical act of creating a stage space and filling it with actors. Line length, rhythm, poetry, imagery, punctuation, sequence of speakers, implied action—all can be signals for actors to follow. Students read the scripts of Shakespeare looking for clues that tell them how to perform and then transform those clues into their own interpretations of scenes from the plays. Implied in this approach is the notion that the dramatic process unveils the literary treasures in the play that are undiscoverable through quiet, independent reading. In other words, until we have students make the choices that actors and directors have to make, much of the literary text will remain frozen on the page.

The scripts themselves, which offer the opportunity to learn a dynamic way of reading, are the basis of Shakespeare's place in the curriculum. If we teach students how to read Shakespeare as though they are looking at a blueprint for action on a stage, as a story that has within it a complex set of stage directions for actors and directors, and that within the confines of a single set of words are many different plays, we will start them on a journey of critical reading that engages all of the senses and that will increase your students' engagement with any text they read



from that point onward. There is no turning back once one learns to find signals in printed words that translate to action. This book will address that technique head on, so that you can teach your students the process.

Reason Three: Language and Poetry

Most defenses of Shakespeare in the curriculum mention the language and the poetry of Shakespeare as reasons to teach it, and certainly in Shakespeare we have a poet/playwright who undisputedly had the greatest command of the English language ever shown and whose power of sheer imagery, both literal and metaphorical, can take the breath away. The facts that Romeo and Juliet speak sonnets to one another when they first meet, that Richard III opens his play with unforgettable lines, that Shakespeare inhabits no less than 66 pages in Bartlett's *Familiar Quotations* (1980) all demonstrate this illustriousness in language. Nearly everyone who has studied Shakespeare with any seriousness has favorite passages they can cite at will. What is it about the power of the words themselves that compels us to remember them? The words often take on lives of their own outside the context of their plays, transferring themselves into our own realities. I still can remember a passage from *Othello* that I copied and taped to my wall, "The robbed that smiles steals something from the thief, / He robs himself that spends a bootless grief" (I, iii, 238–240). Often we quote Shakespeare in our common sayings, not even knowing that we are. I recently overheard a group of high school students talking about a friend who did something embarrassing, and a girl among them said, "Oh, he's a piece of work" (*Hamlet*, II, ii). Indeed.

STUDENT ACTIVITY: THAT SOUNDS FAMILIAR!

Have students browse the Internet for lists of common phrases taken from Shakespeare, rank their familiarity with the phrases, then share their findings with each other. See Student Activity Sheet 1 (SAS 1; pp. 28–29) for a handout to facilitate the activity.

Shakespeare often takes the most basic of human expressions and transforms them into stunning imagery, and he even gives unlikely characters some sense of imagery in description. Instead of saying, for instance, "It's not dark yet," a murderer in *Macbeth* says, "The west yet glimmers with some streaks of day" (III, iii, 7). And, the most well-known passages from Shakespeare are well-known precisely because they in some way crystallize what we commonly recognize as truth into an exact and profound expression of clear thinking: for instance, *Hamlet*'s "To be or not to be, that is the question" (III, i, 64).



Furthermore, studying the language of Shakespeare extends our students' verbal agility and range of expression. Active engagement with Shakespeare increases their vocabulary and can inspire them to engage in creative expression of their own. You will want to give your students opportunities to write poems, sonnets, blank verse, soliloquies, dramatic dialogue, and other creative forms during their study of Shakespeare.

Reason Four: Cultural Heritage

Perhaps the most compelling reason to study Shakespeare is in the service of sharing and extending our cultural heritage. Shakespeare no longer belongs solely to 16th- and 17th-century England any more than England can claim sole rights to Harry Potter. Shakespeare belongs to us all. While we can learn much about Elizabethan England by starting with Shakespeare (Greenblatt, 2001, 2004; Shapiro, 2005), and while studying Elizabethan England can help us interpret some passages of Shakespeare, neither approach is necessary for the work to have value for us. Nor will the historical perspectives impute value to a 21st-century teen if the work has no significance to the here and now. To be an educated person in our society and be ignorant of Shakespeare is to be culturally handicapped. Even if one ultimately rejects Shakespeare as outdated and politically incorrect, as some have done, to not know Shakespeare, at least the greatest works that are part of our cultural conscience, is to stand at a disadvantage in literate society.

Reason Five: Rigor and Challenge in the Curriculum

Another reason to teach Shakespeare is that his writing is challenging. I would submit that this is an important reason for teaching Shakespeare in any class, but most certainly an important reason in Advanced Placement classes. In order to extend our literacy skills and broaden our scope of possibility for learning, we must encounter literature that is at the appropriate level of challenge. Vygotsky (1978) knew that children must engage in material at their zone of proximal development. Shakespeare provides us with material, and we have teaching techniques for his work, that can meet many different developmental levels of challenge. Students who bump (gently) against the walls of their ignorance push those walls backward, broadening their knowledge and making the next bump easier to take. As students challenge themselves, and as you challenge them to read, discuss, debate, and perform Shakespeare, they and you both extend literacy and build confidence to use in future reading tasks.