

# Teaching Shakespeare

## Successful strategies to use with students of Shakespeare

“Things won are done; joy’s soul lies in the doing,” (Cressida in Troilus and Cressida,)

Every year for the past twenty years my middle school students have performed a full length Shakespeare play, and before I have them try out for parts, we study the play. The enthusiasm for participating in our play grows every year. I credit our examination of the characters, the story and a variety of mediums for their eagerness. Even if they don’t want to perform, students of all ability levels get excited when they discover they can relate to something written so long ago. Recently, I had the students create a modernized version of the beginning of “A Midsummer Night’s Dream.” One of my struggling 6<sup>th</sup> grade readers wrote, “Hermia said to Helena, ‘Don’t tattle. You can have yucky Demetrius.’ Then Helena said, ‘He’s not yucky. He’s dreamy.’” This student, who usually can’t be persuaded to finish a short worksheet with sustained attention, wrote four pages and was eager to tell me his plot ideas. There is just something about Shakespeare’s works that has the power to captivate kids.

Teaching Shakespeare and providing your students the “aha!” moment of clarity found when tackling challenging material can be greatly satisfying. Shakespeare’s themes are universal and resonate with people of all ages. They are imminently relatable to modern experiences, politics, and current events.

Here are some tips to remember:

1. Always believe in your students and their ability to comprehend Shakespearean text. Your expectations communicate your confidence, which builds their confidence.
2. Never suggest that it is extremely difficult. Challenging is okay, but English is English after all. Shakespeare is accessible to all ability levels. My middle school students, from Highly Capable masterminds to those with Special Education IEP’s, all are capable of meeting Shakespeare and enjoying his words and stories. You are helping them to build vocabulary while increasing their capacity to persevere. Challenging tasks become easier over time.
3. There is a rich diversity of mediums (movies, stories, children’s books, spin-offs, literary allusions, to introduce students to Shakespeare’s works. Use this variety to your advantage, combining and doing side by side study. Humans find pleasure in making connections, and connecting diverse texts/media builds brain pathways and memory.
4. Act sections out and get a little crazy OR Show video selections that entice students by virtue of the strong acting. Have your students role play and include costumes and props. Novelty and fun also build brain pathways. Many of Shakespeare’s characters have extreme, entertaining qualities. Young people love to categorize and create labels for others. Once they become familiar with a character, you can help them see changes over time, and begin to appreciate catalysts for actions as well as underlying motivations. Caliban had his island stolen from him. Helena is obsessively in love and painfully rejected. Labels can change as our understanding changes.

5. Be creative and encourage your students to be creative. Include student illustration opportunities so students can begin to envision their own idea of the various characters and settings. The benefit of this is that it draws in students who love to be creative, and helps everyone become rooted in who the characters are, especially if the drawings are accompanied with writing. Brain science tells us that using different areas of the brain while learning builds unique pathways and access to memory.
6. Grant your students the real language of Shakespeare. Although modern translations and stories assist in the teaching of Shakespeare's plays, it is absolutely essential to provide significant exposure to his real prose and poetry. Read it aloud. Have fun with the witty language. The real language, its clever arrangements, the puns, the reversals, the rhythm and meter, provide a window into language at its finest. Students don't need us to dumb it down for them.
7. Highlight the selections that have the most appeal to young people- battles of wit, insults, and accessible metaphors and scenes. Time spend in preparation choosing the elements that you know your students will most relate to pays big dividends. Students are much more likely to become bored and disaffected with Shakespeare's works if they are given an unmanageable whole lump and force fed. Smaller chunks can be closely examined to great effect while other portions may be better shown via movie excerpts and snippets of children's books.
8. Pair his plays with modern stories that have similar themes and are easily understandable and engaging so they can make satisfying and enlightening connections. Have your students write stories that provide modern connections. Making these connections and creating their own texts places them side by side with the greatest writer of all time. What a great feeling!
9. Ask questions that engage students in discussion:
  - Twelfth Night—Are practical jokes a form of bullying?
  - The Tempest and Romeo and Juliet-- Is love at first sight possible?
  - The Tempest—How might giving up one's desire for revenge be empowering?
  - A Midsummer Night's Dream—Is all fair in love and war?
  - Comedy of Errors—If your country is in conflict with another country, does that automatically make its people your enemies?
  - Hamlet—How do our families troubles cause trouble in our hearts and minds?
  - Macbeth—Is our fate determined for us or can we create our own destinies?
  - Othello- Why is jealousy so destructive?
  - Julius Caesar—What is more important, being loyal to your friends no matter what they do, or putting the good of others first? How can words be used to manipulate us?

Helping students engage in civil scholarly discussion prepares them for future learning and rewarding relationships. It helps them begin to form and defend their own moral views.
10. Show that you enjoy the language of Shakespeare and are giving them a great gift by introducing them to the bard. Build connections so that they will see his words come to life in a memorable way.

May you find joy as you help your students achieve the rewards of exploring and understanding the rich characters, the irresistible humor, and deep and thoughtful concepts of Shakespeare's timeless works.