

**Time Needed:** 120 minutes

**Grade Levels:** 5<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grades

**Supplies:**

- Duke TIP [Speak the Speech Monologue](#) (script)
- Space for performance and practice
- Duke TIP [Speak the Speech Rubric](#)
- Highlighters, markers, and different colors of pens for marking up monologues
- Optional: art supplies such as construction paper, glue sticks, tape, and markers for making masks or props

**Content Objectives: Students will know:**

- The meaning of Hamlet's monologue that opens Act 3, Scene 2 of the play.
- The ways in which conscious choices in performance can affect meaning in drama

**Skill Objectives: Students will be able:**

- To determine or clarify the meaning of unknown and multiple-meaning words and phrases in Shakespearean drama, choosing flexibly from a range of strategies.
- To brainstorm different approaches to performing *Hamlet*.
- To deliver a monologue from *Hamlet* in front of a group of fellow students using conscious choices in delivery.
- To compare and contrast the varieties of English used in drama.

**Essential Understandings: Students will understand:**

- How nonverbal communication strategies in acting can not only complement and elaborate but also detract from and obscure a play's meaning.
- That the written word can be substantially and substantively supplemented through oral, visual, and nonverbal modes of communication
- Performing Shakespeare should be approached with a sense of play, experimentation, and comfort with failure.

**Essential Questions: Students will explore:**

- How do different performance strategies convey, highlight, or distort different meanings of a text?
- How do Shakespeare’s language and usage of various literary devices convey meaning?
- How do we reconcile different possible interpretations of a text?
- What strategies might we use in understanding unfamiliar language in Shakespeare’s plays?
- What strategies might we use to feel more comfortable speaking and performing in front of others?

**Pedagogical Notes:**

Teaching Shakespeare through experiential learning activities works well with Common Core Standards for grades 5 and up targeting language comprehension, speaking and listening, and integration of knowledge and ideas, which includes analyzing “how visual and multimedia elements contribute to the meaning, tone, or beauty of a text” ([CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.7](#)). This lesson plan gives students practice in the integration of knowledge and ideas, which directly addresses the standard in which students are expected to “integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words” ([CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.7](#)).

As an icebreaker activity on the first day (or couple of days) of a Shakespeare (or other drama-based) class, this lesson allows students to become comfortable with each other as well as the kind of readings they’ll be using in class. Especially when teaching plays, remind students to be aware that these texts are primarily meant to be performed and that the lines are meant to be heard out loud. Much of the meaning of Shakespeare’s words—and quite a bit of the humor—only becomes clear when it is heard, rather than read. [This short video](#) from the Globe Theater in London provides a helpful introduction to the ways in which some of Shakespeare’s meaning is obscured now that we pronounce the words differently from what scholars refer to as the plays’ “O.P.,” or “original pronunciation.” Other scholars emphasize that Shakespeare’s own education consisted primarily of oral recitation of Latin rhetoric and grammar, which should encourage us to make oral performance a part of teaching his work to students today (see Davidson 50).

*Hamlet* in particular is a play about hearing, overhearing, and being heard. Much of the play’s action is driven by what is heard: when Hamlet hears a noise while confiding in Gertrude in her room, for example, his defensive action causes him to kill Polonius. If this “Speak the Speech” exercise is used as a lead-in to studying *Hamlet* (rather than an introductory exercise to an experiential learning-based Shakespeare class—it works well for both), beginning with a discussion about how speech is delivered and heard can be a productive introduction to the play. Many scholars, such as Allison K. Deutermann,

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have discussed the ways in which the play depicts “hearing as a potentially violent, dangerous act” (235). She observes that, “Since *Hamlet* is a tragedy of revenge, its emphasis on sound's power to wound makes generic sense. And indeed, *Hamlet* himself often speaks in the ear-splitting style he derides” (235). By beginning the play with a focus on sound, speech, and performance, students can be attuned from the start to the ways in which sound, performance, and what is heard are central to the play's plot and themes.

## Background of the Play

In this monologue, which opens Act 3, Scene 2 of the play, Hamlet is instructing a troupe of visiting actors how to deliver their lines and perform in the play he has commissioned from them. This “play within a play,” *The Murder of Gonzago*, mirrors the murderous discoveries in *Hamlet*: that the Prince of Denmark's uncle gained the throne by murdering his brother, Hamlet's father, and marrying the queen, Hamlet's mother. In this monologue, Hamlet directs the players to strike a balance between performative and natural behavior. It's important to realize that in Shakespeare's time, the theater lacked the kind of participant which we now call the director. Anything we might now think of as stage direction or acting notes came primarily from the text of the play and the actor's own ideas (Zafar-Arif). In this context, Hamlet's monologue demonstrates another innovation of Shakespeare's: the concept of stage direction.

In this monologue, Hamlet explains to a visiting acting troupe how he wishes them to act out the scene he has written for them. It is often played for laughs, as Hamlet is quite specific in his instructions: don't over-act, don't wave your arms around too much, stick to the script and don't ad lib. In this exercise, students perform the monologue both according to Hamlet's directions as well as by breaking all of the rules he sets forth. By encouraging students to ham it up and break the rules, this exercise encourages a sense of play, experimentation, and comfort with failure which can be essential to a productive learning community.

## Activities

### *First Class Period: Pre-work*

Let students know that tomorrow they will be engaging with an unfamiliar text in order to become more comfortable with Shakespeare's language as well as gain some insights into the ways in which choices made about performing can affect the meaning of the text. You might consider telling them that part of the day's activity will involve their explicitly breaking Shakespeare's rules, if such a teaser might pique their interest.

Students may read the *Hamlet* Speak the Speech monologue prior to class. (This monologue is available in the Speak the Speech Monologue handout in a large font, suitable for annotating and reading from.)

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However, as this lesson plan can function as a first-day, icebreaker activity, it's possible to have the students come to this assignment without any prior preparation.

### *First Class Period: Warm-Up*

- Begin class with a couple of short warm-up theater games, such as [“Zip, Zap, Zop”](#) or [“Invisible Balls.”](#) The primary purpose of these warm-ups is to make students more comfortable taking part in the kind of experiential learning this lesson entails.
- Review the Speak the Speech challenge. Discuss the Essential Understandings you want students to gain from this experience.
- Review the Speak the Speech Rubric. Emphasize that the goal of this formative assessment is not to deliver the monologue from memory, but rather to deliver it consciously, with planned pauses, vocal delivery (volume and tone, for example), and movements.
- Review the monologue with students, clarifying a few unclear words or phrases. (Teachers may find it helpful to refer to the glossary at the end of this lesson plan.) Try modeling one of these strategies for your students to get them started. For example, you might read the first four lines aloud, and then ask for suggestions for what “lief” means in that context. Ask students how they might express a similar sentiment in their own words.
  - Depending on student readiness, you may decide to leave much of the monologue’s interpretation to the students, encouraging them to work out meanings through context clues, the sound of the words out loud, or through appropriate research in dictionaries or online searches, as available. You may hand out copies of the glossary which is included in this lesson plan.
- Depending on student readiness, you might model some strategies other than starting with reference works to work out meaning.
  - Try reading sets of lines out loud and emphasizing different words. Read the opening lines with the following emphases:
    - “**Speak** the speech, I pray you.”
    - “Speak the **speech**, I pray you.”
    - “Speak the speech, I **pray** you.”
    - “**Speak** the **speech**, I **pray** you.”Ask student how these different readings change their understanding of the words—and how they might make the words’ meaning clearer for them.
  - Brainstorm different tones that you might use to read lines (surprised, afraid, angry, determined, sad) and have students read these opening lines in these different tones. How does that affect their understanding of the lines? How does it change the words meanings?
  - After reading the opening lines out loud in this way, have the students work through the meaning of the monologue, paraphrasing it or putting it in their own words. For example, the teacher may model this by paraphrasing the first four lines as,

*Please say this speech as I showed you—with some feeling! But if you just say the words without feeling, as many of you actors do, I'd rather a football coach shout it!*

- Once students have a grasp on what Hamlet's instructions are for the players, have students identify the "right" and "wrong" ways of performing, according to Hamlet. Use a whiteboard to generate a list of "right" and "wrong" ways of performing the monologue.
- Depending on other standards you may wish to meet, as well as student age level, have students identify applicable literary devices such as rhyme, alliteration, assonance, and kinds of imagery the monologue contains. Ask students to brainstorm ways that they might emphasize these elements. (10-15 minutes)
- You may choose to work through the entire monologue as a class or have students work on the monologue in pairs or small groups, depending on student ability and class structure. You may want to refer to the **Sample Paraphrase** of the monologue at the end of this lesson plan.

#### *Monologue Exploration and Preparation:*

- Break students into pairs. Each pair should decide which student will perform the monologue following the advice that it gives and which student will perform the monologue and doing the things it advises against. Alternately, you may assign each individual line to a pair of students to prepare: one student performing the line the "right" way and one the "wrong" way.
- Pairs should spend the remainder of class developing and practicing their performances and annotating their scripts with those performance plans. The teacher should check in with each pair periodically, to ensure that they have an appropriate understanding of their monologue, that they are making acting choices based on the Speak the Speech Rubric, and to provide guidance as the students' ideas develop. The teacher may provide art supplies for students who wish to create simple props or masks for their performances.
  - Encourage students to experiment, be silly, and try things out. There's no "right" answer to these performances; rather, encourage them to try delivering the monologue in a lot of different ways, in different parts of the room, changing what they emphasize and what they focus on.
  - Questions you might ask include
    - What does your line mean?
    - How are you interpreting the meaning?
    - Is your interpretation based on movement? On the tone of your voice? (You might refer to the list of different tones generated earlier.) On your volume?
    - How do your "right" and "wrong" interpretations compare to each other? Are they exact opposites? Or are they different in other ways?
    - When you watch your partner perform, do you get any new ideas for your own interpretation?

- It is hoped that students will realize that even following the “right” instructions, there are many different ways to interpret a performance. Ask students which “interpretation” they prefer to perform, and why. If students are doing one line each, you might ask each student to prepare a couple of different interpretations; time permitting, classes could go through the monologue multiple times, with multiple interpretations of both “right” and “wrong.”
- By the end of the class period, students should have an annotated script to use when delivering the monologue. Encourage students to mark up their script with this information; they may find highlighters and different colors of pens useful to annotate pauses, movement from one place to another, hand or arm gestures, or other movements, and words to emphasize using different colors. (45-50 minutes)

### *Next Class Period: Warm-Up*

If this lesson plan takes place over the course of two class periods, make sure you also begin the second class period with a couple of short warm-up theater games, such as [“Zip, Zap, Zop”](#) or [“Invisible Balls.”](#) The primary purpose of these warm-ups is to make students more comfortable taking part in the kind of experiential learning this lesson entails, especially prior to performing in front of the class. It will also loosen them up for this class period’s performances.

You can also provide a 10-minute practice period so pairs can be ready.

### *Monologue Performance (40-60 minutes, depending on class size and monologue delivery)*

- Before the first pair performs, remind the students about being respectful audience members. We should all pay attention and hope for the best for all of the performances; we clap after every performance, no matter what happens.
- Depending on student readiness and enthusiasm, decide whether you are going to have each pair perform the entire monologue the “wrong” and then the “right” way or whether you want them to present their best excerpts of 5-10 lines.
- Each pair should take turns performing the monologue or an excerpt: first the “wrong” way and then the “right way.” Alternating “wrong” and “right” performances—rather than having all of the “wrong” performances and then all of the “right” ones—encourages students to respond to each performance individually, rather than the tendency to “rank” the same kind of performances hierarchically.
- After each performance, ask members of the audience to record or share aloud the following:
  - One observation about how this pair defined “right” or “wrong,” such as asking a clarifying question about how the pair came to that definition
  - One positive comment about choices made for emphasis, volume, tone, etc.
  - and one suggestion for improvement either in performance or in how to define wrong or right, based on the text.

- Either after each performance, or at the end of the performances, the teacher should collect these responses and summarize the responses for the students. Depending on the class context, teachers may choose to provide this response immediately after the performance or later, after student reflection. Teachers should also draw upon these responses when conducting student assessment of the activity, after the activity and reflection is complete.

### *Reflection (15 minutes)*

Give students time to reflect upon their performances using some of the questions below, depending on student age, interest, and your curriculum standards. Depending on time, readiness, and interest, you can have each student write and submit private reflections or facilitate a discussion after students jot notes. They should reflect on their risk-taking and comfort level with play, experimentation, and failure.

- What strategies worked for understanding unfamiliar language in Shakespeare’s plays?
- How did you come to your definition of “wrong” and “right” based on the text? Now that you’ve seen your peers’ performances, have you changed your mind as to what Hamlet might have really meant?
- What was your original plan for the performance? How did we actually perform it? How do you account for the differences between your original plan and its execution?
- How do different performance strategies convey different meanings of a text?
- How do different performance strategies distort different meanings of a text?
- How do Shakespeare’s language and usage of various literary devices convey meaning?
- What do we think Shakespeare really meant when Hamlet says \_\_\_\_\_ [insert phrase]? How do we reconcile different possible interpretations of a text?
- What strategies might we use to feel more comfortable speaking and performing in front of others?
- On a scale of 1 to 10, how much risk did you take with this performance? How do you know?
- How did you feel when performing? What did it feel like, taking risks in the moment?
- What was working with your partner like? What did you contribute to the performance? What did you contribute?
- What did you learn while watching other pairs perform? Was there another performance that was particularly insightful or creative?
- What did you learn today about reading and interpreting Shakespearean language, performing Shakespeare, performing in front of others, or something else?
- Whose performance really achieved Hamlet’s stated goal for acting and actors? How do you know?
  - (Hamlet’s words) *the purpose of playing, whose end, both at the first and now, was and is, to hold, as 'twere, the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her own feature,*

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*scorn her own image, and the very age and body of  
the time his form and pressure.*

- (our words, or paraphrase) *The purpose of acting, from long ago until now, is to try to reflect what life is actually like; to show what goodness looks like what evil looks like, and to accurately reflect modern day.*

If time permits, you might play clips of a couple of different professional actors performing the monologue and ask some of the above questions.

## Assessment

If you plan to use this formative assessment for a later summative assessment, you can give scores and feedback using the Duke TIP Speak the Speech Rubric to assess each student's individual performance as well as pair performance, and then use the same rubric with a later assignment. Otherwise, if this is used as an introductory activity, use the oral and/or written reflections as part of the greater portfolio of student work artifacts gathered during a unit.

## Works Cited

*Common Core State Standards Initiative*, 2018, <http://www.corestandards.org/>.

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Deutermann, A. K. "'Caviare to the general'?: Taste, Hearing, and Genre in Hamlet." *Shakespeare Quarterly*, vol. 62 no. 2, 2011, pp. 230-255.

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### **Shakespeare: Hamlet**

**Speak the Speech: Sample Paraphrase**

*Please say this speech as I showed you  
—with some emotion to it! But if you just say the words without any feeling,  
as many of your actors do, I'd rather  
a football coach shout it! And don't  
wave your arms around a lot, like this, but be gentle,  
since even in the middle of an emotional scene  
you should have  
a look about you that makes your performance seem natural. O, it  
is the worst to hear a loud  
actor in a bad wig to overact badly,  
to make the audience deaf, who  
for the most part are too dumb to enjoy anything but  
reality television and noise. I would have  
an actor like this beaten for acting only violently  
and too dramatically; please, avoid it.*

*But don't be too quiet, either, but use your own judgement;  
let your movements and words match each other;  
keep this in mind: that you don't overdo things and try to  
act naturally; for anything other than natural acting  
is not what acting is about. The purpose of acting, from long ago  
until now, is to try to reflect what life is actually like;  
to show what goodness looks like  
what evil looks like, and to accurately reflect  
modern day. Now, if you do this badly, though it makes the ignorant audience  
laugh, makes lovers of theater unhappy;  
and the unhappiness of one real lover of theater must  
be more important to you than a whole theater full of people who don't care about  
drama.*

*I have seen some actors  
—and heard other praise—and highly--  
appear to neither sound like or walk like any kind of man I know of;  
they moved about so strangely that I thought some of them  
were made to look like men, but weren't actually human,  
they acted so oddly.*

*Oh, do it right. And let those  
who are comic actors stick to the script;  
for there are some who will laugh,  
or try hard to make the audience laugh,  
too; and these efforts will take away from the play's meaning.  
That detracts from the play and makes the actor look bad.  
Go, get ready.*

## Glossary

**lief:** gladly

**temperance:** self-restraint

**periwig-pated:** wearing a wig

**Termagant:** a violent character in early Christian drama

**out-herods Herod:** another violent character popular in plays at the time

**come tardy off:** perform badly

**gait:** manner of walking

**journeymen:** workers