

# First Shakespeare's

## Guided Readings of Shakespeare's Plays

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### Purpose

These workbooks address three long-time desires on my part as a teacher:

The first is to give my students some guidance in reading difficult texts without telling them what the works say. The study questions point students in the right direction but do not explain difficult passages for them. With a little help students can figure out even the most difficult passages.

The second desire is to have a text in which students have room to write their reactions as they read. The space to the right of the play gives students that room, and putting the study questions next to the text encourages accurate and specific responses. By creating just a few questions that all must answer and by distributing all other questions in four groups, I have tried to strike a balance between giving students room of their own and leading them by the hand.

The third desire is addressed by the distribution of all the questions other than the few common ones. If students are assigned questions, then they know that their responses will be important to the entire class's understanding of the text in class. Whether teachers discuss the text with the entire class or divide the class into groups, all students know that they are responsible for specific questions.

The questions cover different ways people read Shakespeare's plays. Students will find questions that ask them to imagine the significance of staging, that ask them to read passages closely, that ask them to relate important phrases to earlier moments in the text, and that ask them to consider an idea's importance beyond the text. No particular interpretation or pedagogy guided the creation of the questions. I relied on my experience in the classroom and on my affection for the texts. Students, teachers, and Shakespeare will make up for the deficiencies in my questions.

### Instructions for Students

I have tried to make the texts obvious because I know that no one likes to read instructions. If, however, the pages confuse you at first glance, I have constructed them in the following way.

The play is, of course, in the left panel. Following each scene announcement, you will find some vocabulary in small print. These are words crucial in the scene or which have some value for students, whose lives are ruled by standardized tests. The underlined words appear in *Vocabulary for the College Bound* by Levine, Levine, and Levine (a family affair, no doubt). The very brief definitions are those appropriate for the scene. Those are not always the words' most common meanings. You would do far better to look up words yourself.

In the right panel are all the questions and the few comments. Those questions that all students should answer are in **bold-faced font**. Those "common" questions cover the bare essentials. All other questions have an A, B, C, or D in front of them. Most of those questions refer to the speeches immediately to their left. Sometimes questions require reading further or waiting until you have read the entire scene or rereading earlier moments. In all those cases, the phrasing of the question will make clear what portions of the play you should consider. Underlined questions refer to underlined lines. Comments and questions about issues beyond the text itself are bracketed.

Most of the time there is room below the question for a response. However, because some passages need more than one question, sometimes there will not be sufficient space below the question for a response. In such cases you should either find some space above and draw an arrow or put an asterisk next to the question and compose the response in the “footnote” pages at the rear of the text, remembering to put on the footnote page the page number of the passage.

The footnote pages give you a place to compose extra or extended responses. You might find a speech that gets you thinking. When that happens, you will need more room for your thoughts than the right panel offers. If you are lucky, you might find that you have written an essay by the time you finish reading the play.

You will, naturally, follow your teacher’s instructions about which questions to answer. If you are told to answer all the questions, ignore the letters. If you are assigned a letter, try to offer your classmates something helpful in your responses. If you have an inspired teacher who leads discussion without reference to the questions, I hope my questions help you follow your teacher’s thoughts. If you are an independent soul who wants to have an unguided reaction to the text, buy a lot of whiteout.

I know that life was hard enough when your homework was just reading the play. Now, on top of everything else, you are asked to answer a bunch of questions. My idealistic hope is that if the questions help you understand the play more, then you will be able to imagine these characters’ lives more fully and your reading will be more fun. My practical sense tells me that if the questions prevent you from just running your eyeballs over the words without trying to figure out what’s going on, then the questions will have served some purpose.

## **To Teachers**

As my title suggests, these workbooks are meant for students coming to the play for the first time. As reading Shakespeare is part of learning to read, I have created texts that avoid the footnotes and commentaries that overwhelm students. These texts do not pretend to be scholarly. Such editions are better for “second readings” of the plays. I have also avoided telling the students what the play says by either rewriting the play in some simplified form or by summarizing and outlining for them. My self-interest suggests that it would be better if the people who will be my doctors, lawyers, and auto mechanics know how to read for themselves.

My distribution of the guiding questions into four groups is an attempt to avoid drowning students under a wave of questions. Although I expect students to read all the questions, thoughtful responses to a few questions are probably better than many single word responses. Limiting the number of questions each student is responsible for also discourages the all too familiar sight of students copying each other’s homework.

Any set of questions must push students toward a certain reading of the play, and you will, no doubt, easily see my pet theories. Nevertheless, I trust that questions, as opposed to comments, will help students find their own reactions and avoid the plagiarism (naï ve and otherwise) that mars some student essays.

The questions in the workbooks are not meant to cover every aspect of the text. If students can answer most of the questions well, they will have a basic but far from complete understanding of the plays. I have tried through the questions to point to ideas but not to pursue them in depth. Readers need to make the play their own, and teachers need to guide their students as teachers see fit. To that end, teachers are encouraged to ignore, delete, change, and add questions. After all, you know your students better than anyone else.