

Standards Focus: Approaching Shakespeare's Language

When approaching the works of Shakespeare, it is important to remember that Shakespeare intended his works to be performed in front of an audience. If you are having trouble understanding what you are reading when you are reading silently to yourself, remember that this could be one of the reasons you may be having difficulty. The following are some guidelines to help you approach the language, and to comprehend the reading a little better.

1. **blank verse**: most of Shakespeare's plays are written in this form, which is very close to normal speech rhythms and patterns. Often Shakespeare will deviate from this form in order to make a point about the character's state of mind or for other emphasis, like a change in the mood.
2. **double entendre**: phrases or words which have double meanings, one of which is usually sexual in nature
3. **iambic pentameter**: a 10-syllable line divided into 5 iambic feet (one stressed syllable followed by one unstressed syllable). This is the basic rhythm of Shakespeare's verse.
4. **imagery**: language which works to evoke images in your mind (i.e. "And with thy bloody and invisible hand / Cancel and tear to pieces that great bond / Which keeps me pale.")
5. **metaphor**: a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is replaced by another, often indicating a likeness or similarity between them (ie. "Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player...")
6. **prose**: normal speech rhythm; Shakespeare often wrote certain characters speaking either in all verse or all prose, indicating some personality trait of the character. If the character deviates from its normal form, be aware of a changing state of mind...often prose signals a character slipping into insanity!
7. **pun**: a play on words that either sound alike or that have multiple meanings
8. **rhyming couplet**: two rhyming lines at the end of a speech, signaling that a character is leaving the stage or that the scene is ending
9. **simile**: a figure of speech comparing two unlike things that is often introduced by like or as (i.e. "My love is like a red, red rose")