

SUGGESTIONS FOR WRITING ABOUT SHAKESPEARE

1. A good undergraduate Shakespeare paper should be concerned primarily with a careful and detailed analysis of a particular character, speech, exchange, scene, or theme in one or more of Shakespeare's plays. **Your paper should also pose some kind of argument about your topic, in the sense that it should advance an idea that someone might disagree with.** You are not required to use secondary literature for this paper. Your primary aim should be to construct a meaningful, imaginative reading of some aspect of Shakespeare's works that stays close to the text as it develops. You should support your claims with quotations, but you should also carefully analyze those quotations. And remember, all the normal rules of composition still apply: focused thesis statement, strong topic sentences, unified paragraphs, and thorough analysis. If you don't know how to quote verse and cite plays, see the *MLA Style Manual* (which includes a list of common abbreviations for Shakespeare's works).
2. If you decide to use secondary literature, do not use it as a replacement for your own analysis. Secondary literature is best used as a point-of-departure for amplifying a particular point, or for introducing an idea that you plan to argue against. There is a great deal of secondary literature available on the electronic Gale Shakespeare Collection (link on the course web page). Be sure to use MLA formatting.
3. As you develop your close reading, use the "OED Reports" and "Rhetorical Figures" handouts on the course web page to investigate and analyze particular words and linguistic patterns that might help you amplify your analysis. A close analysis of Shakespeare's language is not possible without consulting the *OED*, so make sure you do so. And it is not enough simply to gloss the common, twentieth-century meaning of the word—use the *OED* handout to help you say something about the poetic power of Shakespeare's language. The same goes for rhetorical figures—it's not enough simply to identify them, you need to say something about how these figures shape meaning and create poetic effects in Shakespeare's works.
4. In the case of some plays, such as *Othello* and *King Lear*, there is considerable scholarly disagreement about which version (folio or quarto) is "authoritative." You might want to develop a paper that argues for a particular preference for the play as a whole, or for a particular scene. You should begin by looking at what the *Oxford Shakespeare* [PR2754 .W45 1986b] editors have done with the text, and this includes consulting *William Shakespeare: A Textual Companion* by Wells and Taylor [PR3071 .W44 1987], and the Norton Shakespeare, by Greenblatt, which uses, but also alters in some instances, the Oxford text. Keep in mind that some of the Oxford recensions have been hotly disputed.
5. If your paper deals with religious aspects of Shakespeare's works, be sure to use the *Geneva Bible* (1560) [BS170 1560a] as your source for quotations from scripture.
5. If you decide to allude to film or stage versions (or adaptations) of Shakespeare's plays, make sure you integrate them into a focused analysis of a particular play that carefully attends to the ways in which the stage or film production alters or amplifies Shakespeare's text. A paper of this sort should go beyond a simple comparison and contrast paper—try to make a solid argument about the merits or shortcomings of a particular version or adaptation that is rooted in Shakespeare's text.
6. If you are interested in writing about Shakespeare's plays in relation to the social and cultural context of Elizabethan and Jacobean England, see the introductory sections of Bevington. The electronic Gale Shakespeare Collection (link on the course web page) is also a good place to access primary texts relevant to Shakespeare's works. Russ McDonald's *Bedford Companion to Shakespeare* is also a good place to start looking for primary texts and contexts. But remember, Shakespeare's text is your primary concern.
7. Please look at the Shakespeare Collection database at Greenwood Library (it's located under English Language and Literature Databases on their web page). It provides reference data, full-text scholarly periodicals, reprinted criticism, primary source material such as the Prompt Books and the Gordon Crosse Theatrical Diary, and the full-text annotated works from The Arden Shakespeare.

PAPER TOPICS

1. Analyze one of Shakespeare's plays by using one or more performances (or film versions, or film adaptations) as a point of reference. The danger of a paper like this is that it can easily turn into a movie review or a loose shopping list of similarities and differences. To make this kind of paper successful you need to focus on a specific theme, scene, speech, character, or dramatic technique and explain, very carefully, the advantages and disadvantages of particular stagings. Please consult the "handouts" section of my web page for a chronological list of film versions and adaptations of Shakespeare plays.
2. Use the Gale Shakespeare Collection (link on the course web page) to access images and prompt books associated with a particular play. Use these materials to develop an argument about the advantages and disadvantages of staging the play in particular ways.
3. Use the Gale Shakespeare Collection (link on the course web page) to access primary materials relevant to a particular play. Develop an argument about how a specific primary source affected a play by Shakespeare.
4. Explore the metatheatrical nature of Shakespeare's plays.
5. Explore rites of passage in Shakespeare's plays, especially conflicts between children and their parents. Marjorie Garber's *Coming of Age in Shakespeare* (1981) is a useful book on this topic.
6. Develop an argument about Shakespeare's use of language and rhetoric.
7. Develop an argument about conflicting views of love and marriage in Shakespeare's works.
8. Explore Shakespeare's dramatization of a "green" or "holiday" world--a "space that is provided by a temporary freedom from the pressures of a real social world . . . [that] allows characters to 'play' at solutions which could (we imagine) resolve the impediments that real life imposes on happiness" (G.K. Hunter, *OHEL* 6, p. 389). See also C.L. Barber's *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy* (1959) on this topic.
9. Explore Shakespeare's dramatization of different views of political authority, divine right vs. Machiavellian, and perhaps others.
10. Explore Shakespeare's dramatization of gender issues, including the treatment of women, the depiction of femininity or masculinity, issues of cross-dressing, and homo-eroticism.
11. Explore the role of the supernatural in Shakespeare's plays. Why does Shakespeare include supernatural elements? How does he dramatize these elements? Are there complications that arise in introducing these elements?
12. Explore Shakespeare's dramatization of religious issues and ideas.
13. Explore the role and function of the fool in Shakespeare's plays.
14. Explore the idea of revenge in Shakespeare's plays.

Please also look at the Shakespeare Study Questions on my web page for other ideas and resources:

<http://www.longwoodshakespeare.org>