

JEFFREY R. WILSON
HOW TO STUDY A SHAKESPEARE PLAY IN 10 DAYS

Day 1: Get Ready

Don't Read Anything About the Play: This is important. Your impulse will be to read an introduction to the play, or Sparknotes, or a Wikipedia entry. Don't do that. Your single best resource for writing a good essay is your personal reaction to the text, uninfluenced by assumptions about what the text should mean or pressure to "get it right."

Schedule Your Project: Let's start slow. The challenge will be what workplaces call "project management." If you're able to create a schedule, and stick to it, you'll be just fine. So on your calendar, schedule in the times on Days 2-10 that you'll be working on the project. (You'll need about three hours on Days 2 and 6, and about one hour on the other days.)

Get a Reliable Edition: The [Folger Digital Editions](#) are high quality and freely available online. The [New Oxford Shakespeare](#) editions, which have explanatory notes, are available through the library. The [Arden](#) editions are the best for scholarly work.

Find a Production to Watch: As drama, these stories are so much easier to understand when they're played out for you, as they were meant to be. Search the library for a filmed performance of your text (under the "Resource Type" sidebar, click "Video/Film"; under the "Show Only" sidebar, click "Online"). Look for your play, especially, at [Drama Online](#) and [Theatre in Video](#). If there's nothing through the library, try [YouTube](#) or [Amazon](#) (a \$3 rental will be worth the money).

Day 2: Watch the Production and Make Notes

This is the most important step—and you only get one shot at it! That's because you'll only get to experience this text for the first time once. You'd be surprised by how many good essays grow from observations made the first time experiencing a text, when you don't know what's going to happen, and your trying to piece it all together. You'll also save yourself so much time and energy down the road if, instead of flailing about in introductions, criticism, or study guides—trying to discover what other people think this text is about—you just devote the necessary time to experiencing the text directly yourself.

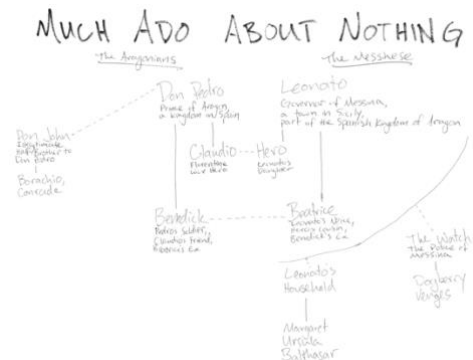
Pay attention to the lines, characters, themes, and questions that catch your attention and make you think. Note that different people will be into different things, and that's ok. Some folks like to focus on iambic pentameter; some couldn't care less. Some look at metaphors and imagery; some don't. Some like to think about gender and politics, some about how the play should be staged. You don't need to care about all of it. Follow your own fascinations. (Keep in mind that every production is an interpretation, and not the only interpretation.)

Day 3: Create a Summary

Make sure you understand the story being told by creating a summary of the play, like the scene-by-scene summaries in the [Oxford Companion to Shakespeare](#). (Those summaries may help you, but the point is for you to summarize things in your own words—because you may want to use this language later in an essay.)

Day 4: Create a Character Map

It will help to understand who everyone is if you can create a map of the characters and their relationships. It will take you a few attempts to draw, but try to arrange things so that the groups of characters, and the relationships between and within groups are clear.



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Day 5: Energize Your Interpretation

Create Some Analogies: Thinking about plot, characters, and themes of the text, identify similar stories, people, and situations that you're familiar with—whether it's from your daily life or the news or your previous studies. The goal here is for you to be able to import your thoughts and feelings related to those familiar, accessible things into your attempt to find your footing in the old, obscure Shakespearean text.

Cast Roles: Which actors would you cast to play the characters in this play, and why?

Personalize It: Where do you see your own experiences, identities, interests, values, beliefs, fears, and obsessions showing up in this play?

Get Creative: If you were to produce or adapt this play in a different setting, how would you do it?

Create Listicles: What are the Top 3 Terrible Decisions in the play? Five jokes in the play that are actually funny! The 10 most important words in the play.

Act It Out: Pick a passage and perform it. Try it a few different ways. Have fun with it: they're called "plays" for a reason.

Meme the Play: "How it started / How it's going."

Day 6: Read Back Over the Text and Make Notes

Now that you understand the basic story being told, start looking for topics and questions that need interpretation. Begin by reading back through the text—more slowly now than when you watched the production. Be on the look out for grey areas, ambiguities, and problems.

Day 7: Identify Key Passages

As you're re-reading the text, make note of the key passages that seem most important. Spend a little time re-reading, interpreting, and wrestling with those passages. When you encounter difficult passages, feel free to consult explanatory notes in scholarly editions or paraphrases in *No Fear Shakespeare*. There's nothing wrong with those study aids—we all use them—but keep in mind that your whole goal is to develop an original idea that reveals something new beyond the common understandings.

Day 8: Read an Introduction

Now that you've formed a somewhat developed understanding of the text, go read an introduction—like the kind found in most complete works or single editions. Try to find one that was written in the last 10 years. Make note of (1) key contexts for the work that you didn't know about (e.g., sources and history), (2) any themes or questions that are identified (do you have any answers based on your earlier work with the text?), and (3) any statements that you might disagree with (meaning you see things differently than the established views).

Day 9: Research Key Contexts

Based on the themes and questions that you've identified thus far, read up in an encyclopedia about some of the historical contexts relevant to the text. Research any key critical debates about the text, and any important productions, adaptations, or afterlives.

Day 10: Write Questions for Further Thought

Synthesizing together your work thus far, write down some questions that you might be able to ask and answer: what needs further interpretation? Whether you're interested in language, themes, or performance, ask the interpretive questions: how did the noteworthy features of this text come into existence? why did Shakespeare write the text in this way? what is the chain of causes and effects at work in this story? how does the text generate enjoyment in audiences? what's it like for audiences to experience this text?