

# HOW TO SPEAK SHAKESPEARE

Evvy Miller | 5 min read

## INTRODUCTION

First and foremost, there are loads of differing schools of thought on how to speak Shakespeare, so my advice is – try everything, watch lots, see what you like and find what works for you. Here are a few things that I've learnt along the way.

## UNDERSTAND YOUR LINES!

This probably sounds incredibly obvious (or would with any modern script). It's crucial you understand what you're saying and what other characters in the scene are saying to you. If you don't, the audience don't stand a chance. This can take a bit of time and a bit of work. That's ok. It's not you, you're not stupid or slow or odd – These plays are over 400 years old and the English language is constantly evolving and changing. It's the same for everyone, I promise.

So –

- Go slow. Don't panic. Take it sentence by sentence. Read it aloud, it's often clearer.
- Look up any words you don't know – Take a look at our Shakespeare glossary for a list of words you'll see frequently and look up any other words you don't recognise online or in a dictionary.
- Pay attention to the verse and the punctuation. They can help you to work out where the emphasis is, which will often unlock the meaning.
- Use a copy of the script that has notes and 'commentary' alongside the lines. It'll give you great insight into the meanings of tricky lines and some of the wordplay as well as explaining some historical context that might help you out. You can pick up books really cheaply online as well as scouting them out in charity shops! The RSC and Arden Shakespeare versions are great.
- Online resources like 'No Fear Shakespeare' can be really handy if you get stuck.
- Don't be afraid to ask for help. Most rehearsals will start with everyone in the cast making sure they're clear on the meaning, so be brave and ask!
- Understand the context. What has happened in the lines /scenes / plays before you speak? Your character might be referring to events that have already occurred so it's important to look at the story as a whole.
- Be kind to yourself. These plays were written a long time ago. Celebrate your successes and notice your improvements as you read and watch more Shakespeare. You'll be amazed at how quickly your skill improves.

## LEARN YOUR LINES

Well yeah, obvious I know. But seriously; the better you know them, the more they'll start to feel like yours. I learn mine line by line and in the rhythm of the verse so that I don't get stuck in a set way of saying them. I pick them up faster if I'm on my feet. Try walking the rhythm of the text, you'll know exactly when you've missed a beat!

## VERSE

By the time you're in performance the audience should hardly notice the verse. It's like a secret for the actor. It echoes our heartbeat and like a heartbeat the speed of it will change depending on the situation. No-one could sit through three hours of 'de-dum de-dum de-dum....' all spoken at exactly the same pace and speed. It makes me bored just thinking about it. Shakespeare varies it and so should you. Use the verse to help you. The end word of each line is important, don't throw it away. The first stressed word of each line is probably really important too. If the verse is broken up and frenetic it probably tells you something about your character's state of mind. Enjoy the rhythm, find the clues. If you focus on the verse while you're learning and rehearsing, you can forget about it during performance.

## SHARED LINES

These give you an amazing clue as to what the rhythm of the scene should be. Pick up your cues!

## MOTIVATION

What does your character need? What do they want? What do they stand to lose and what do they hope to gain? Keep these clear in your mind before you start a scene or monologue.

## ANTITHESIS (OPPOSITES)

These are incredibly helpful both within lines and within the characters as a whole. They help you understand the main arguments and what the character stands to gain or lose.

Shakespeare's characters are complex humans - full of contradictions. His heroes are flawed, and his villains are charming. This is an absolute gift as an actor and looking for and making the most of antithesis will not only make the meaning of your lines more accessible for the audience, it will also deepen your understanding of the character.

## ASK THE QUESTIONS

Ask them. Really ask them.

## EXPECTATION

Your character doesn't know what's coming next, if they'll be interrupted or how long a speech will be - allow new thoughts to surprise you and find out why you need to keep speaking. It's an obvious thing to say but your character doesn't know how the play ends. Keep fighting to change the situation.

### LOOK FOR CLUES IN THE TEXT

Use the text to gather information on your character's psyche and the emotional journey they make throughout a speech, scene or play.

**If your character:**

- Suddenly starts (or stops) speaking in verse,
- Begins using much more irregular/ run on verse,
- Starts using far more or far fewer images,
- Has lots of shared lines with a particular character,
- Is totally silent at a moment when you'd expect them to speak

It probably means something...you decide.

### USE YOUR OWN VOICE

Putting on a 'Shakespeare Voice' is a common trap that people fall into. Yes the words need to be clear, yes, if you're in a theatre, you'll need to be loud enough for everyone to hear but please - trust that your voice and your accent is right for Shakespeare. Unless it's a specific character choice, you don't need to try to sound like an elderly classical actor from the 1800's. Shakespeare is engaging when we see something raw, alive and human on stage, it feels dangerous and exciting. We want to see YOU. The accent that Shakespeare's original actors would've had doesn't exist anymore. It's a free for all. Enjoy.

### AND ABOVE ALL

Speaking Shakespeare gives us the chance to express ourselves in some of the most powerful, emotive, moving and witty language ever written. Have fun.