

Top 10 Study Tips

The Top 10 things you **need** to know when studying...

Shakespeare

1 Read the play!

If you haven't already read the play in class, you should spend a few hours **reading the play for yourself**. Whilst reading, **highlight** your **favourite moments/lines** and anything that really stands out for you. Doing this means that you are **critically interacting with the text**, which will serve you well when you come to study the play more closely.

2 Shakespearean language

Shakespeare's language can be daunting! The idea is not to understand absolutely everything you read, but to focus on **key passages** and the **way that it is written** so you can get the most out of it. Knowing the **plot** and the **characters** inside out is important, too. When tackling a difficult piece of language it can be helpful to think about **who** is saying it and **why**.

3 Key themes

Depending on the play that you are studying, you will need to **identify** and familiarise yourself with the key **themes** within it. Here are some examples:

Macbeth	Romeo and Juliet	The Merchant of Venice	Julius Caesar
Ambition	Love	Love, marriage and friendship	Political power
The supernatural	Reputation	Money	Loyalty
Witchcraft	Fate	Justice and mercy	Misinterpretation and misreading
Tragedy and revenge	Society at war	Religion	Rhetorical power

Draw a **spider-diagram** for each theme, noting any **links between them**. For example:

- In *Macbeth*, is there a link between the theme of **'Ambition'** and the fundamental role it plays in Shakespearean **tragedy**?

- In *Romeo and Juliet*, you could break down the umbrella term of **'Love'** into different kinds of love (courtly, sexual and true love). How do these different portrayals of love interact? How does the theme of a **warring society** conflict with the theme of **love**?
- In *The Merchant of Venice*, consider how **'Justice and mercy'** is closely related with the theme of **'Money'**. Does **money** corrupt? Is **justice** done at the end of the play? How does money affect character relationships?
- In *Julius Caesar*, look at the relationship between the **rhetorical prowess** of characters and the amount of **political power** they hold. Also, explore how **power** is shown to lead to **corruption**; does this affect **loyalty**?

4 Setting of the plays

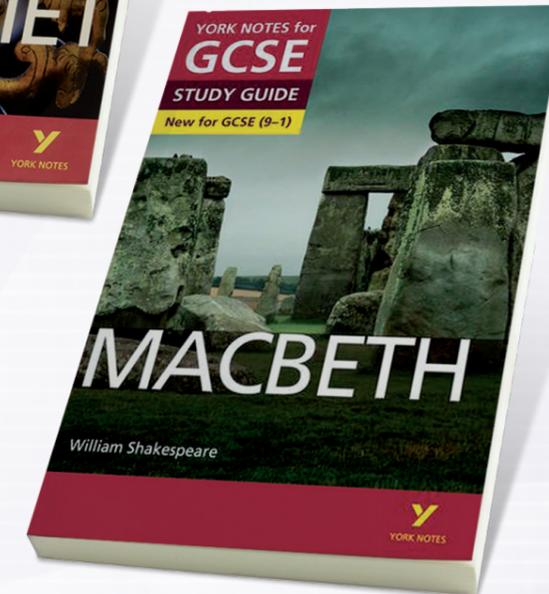
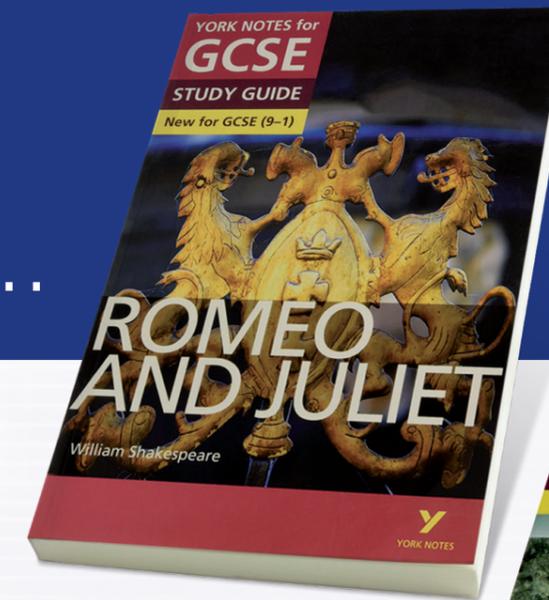
Consider the fact that Shakespeare does not always set his plays in **England**.

- Romeo and Juliet* is set in Verona.
- Macbeth*: Scotland.
- The Merchant of Venice*: Venice.
- Julius Caesar*: Rome.

Ask yourself **why** he chooses overseas locations. For example, with *Romeo and Juliet*, a common English conception of Italy was that feuds and passionate love affairs were commonplace. However, how **Italian** is the play, really? The same question could be asked of Shakespeare's other plays: are they ever **convincing** portrayals of different cultures and societies or are they simple representations of attitudes and manners that would be found in **Elizabethan England**?

5 Writing about form and language

Do you know the difference between a **soliloquy** and a **monologue**? What's a **sonnet**? Do you know what **blank verse** is? What are **rhyming couplets**? The key elements when commenting on **Shakespeare's use of language** and **its structure** are: 1) to use **correct terminology**; 2) to **show understanding of why** he opts for these different forms and techniques; and 3) to comment on the **effect** his choices have. To get you started, here are some key techniques with definitions and examples explained. Try making your own table with more key terms you need to know!



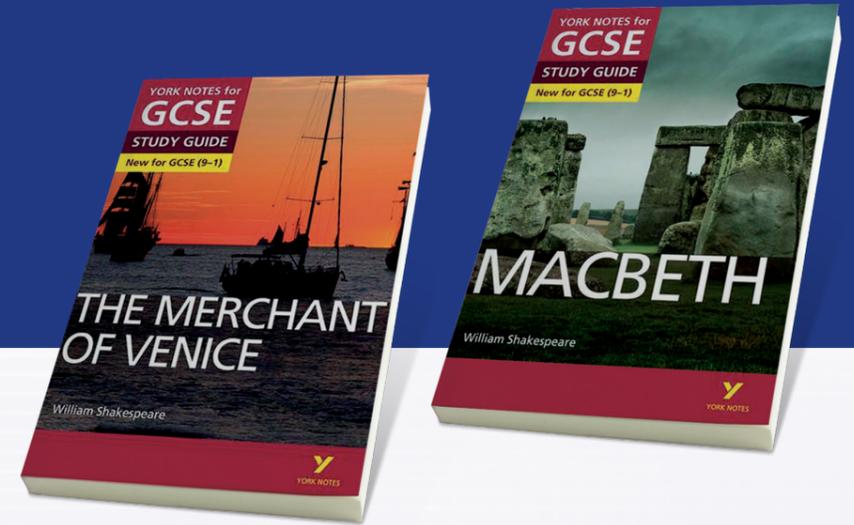
6 Blank verse

What is it?	Technically speaking, blank verse consists of unrhymed iambic pentameter: a line of five iambs (see <i>Iambic pentameter</i>). Simply put, this means lines with 10 syllables, 5 of which are stressed, with no rhyme at the end.
Example?	<p><i>Romeo and Juliet:</i> 'Who now / the price / of his / dear blood / doth owe?' (III.1.145)</p> <p><i>Macbeth:</i> 'When now / I think / you can / behold / such sights!' (III.4.113)</p>
Effect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It's flexible: Shakespeare uses the above basic patterns, but often varies it. To capture the sound of speech, he changes the length and rhythm of lines. Shakespeare often uses blank verse when he wants to convey the intensity of characters' feelings.

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Shakespeare (continued)



7 Iambic pentameter

What is it?	Let's break this down: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> An iamb is the most common 'metrical foot', which basically means how the stress falls in a line (or even more crudely, the rhythm of a line). An iamb consists of a weak stress followed by a strong stress: think 'ti-tum'. Pentameter simply refers to the length of the line, so, in this case, five 'metrical feet' (pent = five). <p>So, put together, all iambic pentameter means is a line consisting of five iambs: (ti-tum / ti-tum / ti-tum / ti-tum / ti-tum).</p>
Example?	Romeo and Juliet: 'But, soft! / What light / through yon- / der win- / dow breaks? <i>It is / the east, / and Jul- / iet is / the sun.</i> ' (II.2.2-3) Hamlet: 'When he / is drunk / asleep, / or in / his rage ' (III.3.90)
Effect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It's closest to the natural rhythm of spoken English, and echoes the sound of a heartbeat. It's very flexible. An overuse of iambic pentameter, however, can feel very mechanical, which is why Shakespeare varies the form of his language.

8 Soliloquy

What is it?	A soliloquy happens when a character is on stage alone , exploring his/her feelings. Other characters do not know what is being said, but the audience do hear what the character is thinking/feeling.
Example?	Hamlet: 'To be or not to be ...' = probably the best-known soliloquy. Macbeth: See Macbeth's soliloquy in Act II Scene 1 lines 31-64. Romeo and Juliet: See Juliet's speech in Act II Scene 2 lines 43-9.
Effect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> For the character, it gives them an opportunity to explore their thoughts and feelings aloud without the pressure of other characters' opinions/views/interjections. For the audience, it allows us an insight into a character's internal struggles, and increases the potential for empathy or distrust of a character. It can be key for creating dramatic irony. A great example of this is Iago's soliloquies, which convey his evil intentions for the audience's ears only, all the while the other characters still view him as 'good, honest, Iago.'

9 Monologue

What is it?	A monologue is an extended speech, which other characters are privy to, or one which is specifically addressed to the audience. These are usually very powerful .
Example?	The Merchant of Venice: Shylock's famous speeches in Act III Scene 1 lines 49-61 and Act IV Scene 1 lines 43-61. Julius Caesar: Marc Antony's speech in Act III Scene 2 lines 70-104.
Effect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Monologues are usually extremely powerful and rhetorically impressive. It is the moment at which the characters dominate the stage with their reasoning/declarations of love/elaborate deceptions. They are often full of powerful imagery and important messages, which are both captivating and crucial to your understanding of both the plot and where the action may be headed – look out for any foreshadowing in these speeches! This is where dramatic irony is reinforced or truths revealed to the characters, so these speeches may mark turning-points in the plays.

10 Rhymed verse/rhyming couplets

What is it?	Simply put, lines of verse that rhyme! In Shakespeare, rhymed verse is usually made up of rhyming couplets . Rhyming couplets are a pair of rhymed lines, of any metre, following the rhyme pattern of AA, BB, CC. Shakespeare often uses rhyming couplets to close a scene; a kind of poetic flourish, if you will!
Example?	Macbeth: Rhyming couplets making up rhymed verse: 'Eye of newt, and toe of frog, (A) Wool of bat and tongue of dog. (A) Adder's fork, and blind-worms sting, (B) Lizards leg, and owl's wing – (B) For a charm of powerful trouble, (C) Like a hell-broth, boil and bubble.' (C) (IV.1.12-19) Julius Caesar: A rhyming couplet closing a scene: 'And after this let Caesar seat him sure, For we will shake him, or worse days endure.' (I.2.317-8)
Effect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Firstly, rhyming couplets (and rhyme in general) create a compelling and strong rhythm, which can prove effective when trying to reinforce certain ideas/concepts/feelings. They can be both playful, keeping the pace of a scene running at a good speed, but they can also be deeply moving and even ominous, thus enhancing the romance or tragedy of a scene/speech. They are a demonstration of Shakespeare's dexterity with language; some of his rhyming couplets are simply sublime. Technically and poetically, therefore, Shakespeare is the king of verse!