

# OTHELLO

The background of the entire page is a painting. It depicts a man with a dark complexion (Othello) and a woman with a light complexion (Desdemona). Othello is in the center, looking down with a somber expression. A green snake is coiled around his neck and shoulder. To his right, a framed portrait of Desdemona is visible. The painting style is expressive, with visible brushstrokes and a rich, somewhat dark color palette.

The Complete Guide and Resource

SAMPLE SECTION

Can the love of a noble African general and his young white bride withstand the jealousy, doubt and racism incited by a bitter frenemy?



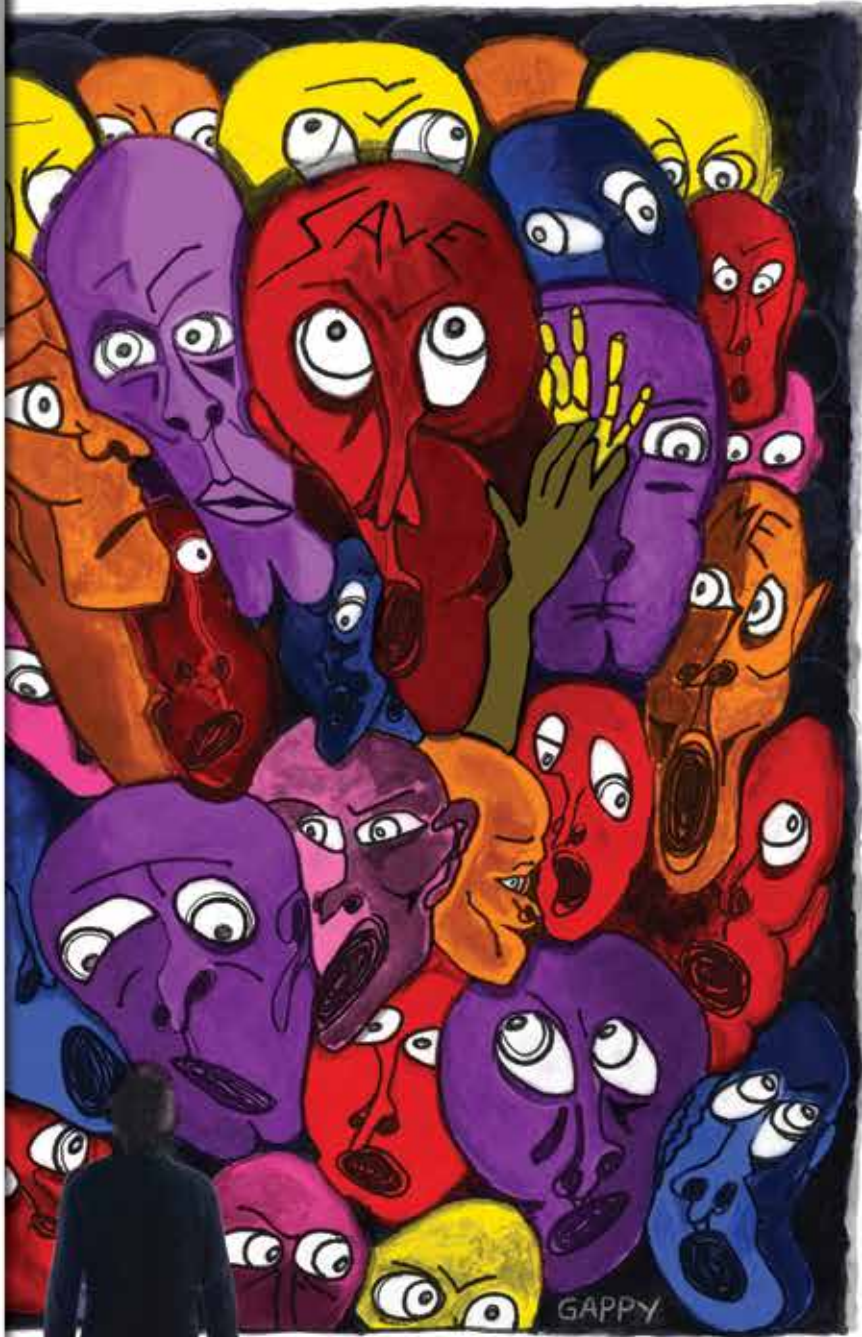
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(Seventh Edition)

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**The Complete**

**POETRY RESOURCE**

Seventh Edition

Prescribed Poems and Learning Materials

A Poem  
is a Poem



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the  
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experience

# **Othello**

**THE COMPLETE GUIDE AND RESOURCE FOR GRADE 12**

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# Foreword

## About the English Experience

*The English Experience is an independent South African publishing house that specialises in developing high-quality English and Life Orientation educational resources for IEB educators and students. The team of passionate, talented experts behind The English Experience works tirelessly to ensure that every resource encourages insight, growth and debate – enriching and challenging both – educators and students – without losing sight of the important goals of academic success and examination readiness.*

Focused on bringing the subject to life, every resource The English Experience publishes incorporates a range of features – including content and contextual questions and stimulating enrichment materials – designed to encourage a critical appreciation of the subject and to inspire the higher-order thinking for which examiners are always looking.

The world-class English Experience team includes highly experienced educators, some with over 20 years of classroom experience, passionate literary experts in various fields, such as historical fiction, poetry and Shakespeare, fanatical historians and researchers, creative writers, skilled editors, pernickety proof-readers and obsessive fact-checkers – together with spirited university lecturers and enthusiastic young minds who help to ensure our approach remains unique and fresh.

While academic success is a non-negotiable consideration, our aspiration is to inspire a genuine interest in, and love of, English literature.



Visit **www.englishexperience.co.za** to learn more about The English Experience and the range of educational resources the company publishes. You can scan this QR code to launch the site on a digital device like a phone or tablet automatically. Please note that you may need to have a 'tag reader' app installed. There are free versions of these apps available, which you can download from the app store on your device.

## Our approach to Shakespeare

*The toughest challenge with Shakespeare can be overcoming the preconceived ideas many students have about how dull and tedious his works are to study. Making sense of the language in which the plays are written can be hard for students, so it is perhaps not surprising that many of them find studying Shakespeare an alienating experience and consider his plays works through which they must toil or labour in order to pass an examination.*

This resource has been written with this reality in mind and particular attention has been paid to breathing new life into Shakespeare and his world. We have worked hard to make sure the content in this resource is fresh and engaging. We have focused on helping modern young readers decipher the play, both by explaining it in context and relating it to contemporary people, events and social realities. We have also included numerous quirky, interesting and fun facts. To further assist students, the content has been divided into accessible, digestible sections as well.

We have endeavoured to make both Shakespeare himself, and his play as approachable and entertaining as possible. We start with the man, exploring his extraordinary life and achievements, and then put these into context by bringing the dirty, dangerous and vibrant world of Elizabethan England to life.

Having armed students with an understanding and appreciation of Shakespeare's intentions and world, we tackle the play. Again, we do so with one goal in mind at every step: to make it as easy to understand and entertaining as possible for modern Matric learners, while remaining academically sound and accurate.

We start by providing students with detailed historical and literary backgrounds, helping them to understand the places, events, literary genre, and conventions on which the play is based. The play is also presented as a short story to help students grasp the plot before we examine the characters, themes and structure in detail.



© deepgrounduk (DeviantArt)

*'What a piece of work is a man! How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty! In form and moving how express and admirable! In action how like an angel, in apprehension how like a god! The beauty of the world. The paragon of animals.'*

(Act 2, Scene 2, Hamlet)

We have worked very closely with the text of the play, adjusting punctuation and spelling and providing explanatory annotations to help students grasp its meaning. We have also incorporated act-based learning into the structure of the resource as we believe that working through the play act by act ensures that a solid foundation of knowledge is laid. Students can then build on this foundation methodically and effectively, only addressing the whole play once they have worked through the text scene by scene.

In the end, we have approached Shakespeare the same way we approach every author and text: with two, interrelated goals in mind. The first, non-negotiable, objective is to ensure examination readiness and success, and the second is to inspire a genuine interest in, and appreciation of, the work being studied.

## Using this resource

*This comprehensive resource includes: the full text of the play; an extensive introduction to Shakespeare and the Elizabethan era; a guide to Shakespearean language; detailed literary context; accessible summaries; rich literary analyses; diverse content-related short questions and literary essay questions (act-specific and general), together with challenging enrichment tasks. In short, everything needed to study the play intensively and bring the text to life.*

## Preparing with the right mindset

We recommend working through the **Introduction to Shakespeare** section first (even before watching a live/recorded performance) so that students become familiar with the man himself, Elizabethan England and the theatre for which he wrote. Some learners might have preconceived ideas about Shakespeare and even a mental block regarding studying his works. This resource has been written with such students in mind and particular attention has been paid to breathing new life into Shakespeare and his world.

To complete the introduction to the playwright, we recommend learners work through the **Shakespearean language** and **Background to the play** sections next. These will deepen their understanding of the play — the characters, themes and plot — before they tackle the text itself. By working through the comprehensive introductory section first, students will be prepared, engaged and able to approach the play with the right mindset.

## Tackling the text

Once students have been introduced to Shakespeare and his play, we recommend that teachers prepare them for working with the actual text by arranging for them to **watch it being performed**. Attending a live performance is often the most effective approach, though not always possible. If it is not, then watching one of the numerous film versions of the play is a more than adequate substitute. Such films include the moving 1987 Johannesburg Market Theatre production directed by Janet Suzman; the accurate and textually close, yet slow-paced adaption directed by Jonathan Miller in 1981; the accessible, yet substantially edited and modified 1995 film directed by Oliver Parker, or the dark, intense, melodramatic 1951 film adaption directed by Orson Welles.

When watching the play being performed, whether live or recorded, remember that each production has its own priorities and constraints, and is also influenced by the socio-political environment in which it has been produced. Janet Suzman's 1987 adaption, for example, was staged before the end of apartheid and so the racist, hostile society inhabited by Othello and Desdemona mirrored the one surrounding the audience. From the start Suzman dooms her Othello, played as a gently melancholic lover by actor John Kani, and pits him against a ruthlessly malevolent Iago based on notorious racist Eugene Terreblanche. Similarly, at the height of the Civil Rights movement in America in 1964, director Gladys Vaughn had actor James Earl Jones play Othello as a dignified and self-contained

'outsider' destroyed by the racist impulses and prejudices of white society. Jonathan Miller's 1981 adaption stars a heavily-made-up Anthony Hopkins as a 'tawny' (brown-skinned) Moor and focuses more on the domestic tension within the drama than its public or racial tensions. Miller admitted that he chose a white actor to play Othello because he wanted to bypass the racial bigotry simmering at the time and feared a black actor might lead a predominantly white audience 'to equate the supposed simplicity of the black with the exorbitant jealousy of the character'. Orson Welles' version of the play has been celebrated as a work of 1950s cinematic excellence, but not for its reduction of the role and character of Desdemona to a fragile, passive and submissive victim.



*The 1987 production of Othello at the Market Theatre, Johannesburg, with John Kani playing Othello and Joanna Weinberg as Desdemona.*



There are other modern adaptations of the play that seek to make it more accessible and relevant by updating either its setting and/or its language. The stark, fierce 2015 adaptation directed by Iqbal Khan for the Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC), for example, updates the setting of the play to a contemporary military barracks and makes Iago a black soldier as well as Othello. There is also *O*, the 2001 film adaptation directed by Tim Blake Nelson that updates the language to modern English and relocates the play to an elite, almost exclusively white American High School where black pupil Odin is the star basketball player and dating a wealthy, beautiful white girl called Desi. Likewise, the 2001 British television film adaptation directed by Geoffrey Sax also uses modern English. It is a fascinating version that updates the setting to a London police force that is struggling to deal with racial tensions in the early 2000s. Another notable recent adaptation is James Marquand's 2017 film *Beautiful Devils*, which sets the play within the contemporary music scene of London and focuses on the bitter revenge plotted when stardom and success split two young best friends apart.

There is also an animated version of the play created by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in 1994. Designed for a younger audience, it offers a condensed, memorably dramatic and emotional adaptation of the play that allows its audience to grasp the essential elements of the plot quickly and easily.



© Cornaby Films

*Osy Ikhlile (left) and Steven Waddington (right) play Oz and Ivan, lifelong friends and music producers in Beautiful Devils. When Oz gets offered a lucrative recording contract, he makes the decision to separate from Ivan professionally. Ivan is enraged by Oz's betrayal and rejection of him and secretly plots to undermine Oz's success and to have him dropped by his music label. Ivan's scheming provokes an escalation of jealousy and paranoia in Oz, with deadly consequences.*

With the students properly prepared and primed, it is time for them to **read the play**. This can be done either act by act or in its entirety. The version of the play included in this resource features relevant annotations to help students understand the meaning and nuances of the text.

Once students have read the play, we recommend working through the act-based **Summaries and analyses** section. Working through the play act by act ensures that a solid foundation of knowledge is laid and then built on gradually and effectively. Students are not required to answer questions that refer to the whole play until they have assimilated it scene by scene.

Each act is broken down into its constituent scenes, each of which is summarised and analysed separately. Students are required to engage with each scene through scene-specific questions. At the end of each act, there are also act-specific essay questions and a series of enrichment tasks (for which marking rubrics are provided in the *Suggested Answers* booklet).

## Ensuring examination readiness and success

To ensure examination readiness and success, the resource also offers extensive information regarding the **Literary essay**. This section provides guidelines on writing literary essays, two annotated examples from which to learn, and a wide selection of rigorous essay topics. It also includes suggestions on how to prepare for the final examination.



### What do you think?

We hope you enjoy this resource as much as we enjoyed putting it together. If you have any comments, queries or suggestions, please do not hesitate to contact us by emailing [info@englishexperience.co.za](mailto:info@englishexperience.co.za) or calling our offices on (011) 786-6702.

## Key to using the boxes in this resource:



### Definition / Glossary

Provides the meanings of words and terms used in the text



### Alert

Something to which you need to pay attention or of which you need to be aware



### Checklist

A list of items or activities required to complete a task satisfactorily



### Information

Provides additional details or facts about a topic



### Quirky Fact

Fun, interesting, extraneous information



### Quote

An interesting or important quotation from the play

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# Introduction to Shakespeare

## Meet William Shakespeare

*Who was William Shakespeare? Sadly, we know very little about the man considered one of the best English dramatists ever to have lived, which is all the more astonishing given the fame and fortune he achieved. In this section, we bring him to life by piecing together what we do know about his life and achievements.*

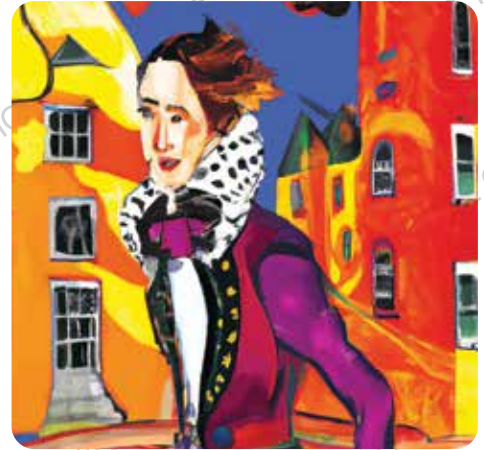
By 1600, the man Voltaire described as ‘a drunken savage, with some imagination’ was enjoying the height of his fame and success. He had hit the big time a few years earlier — as part of the hip group of actors, the Lord Chamberlain’s Men — and made enough money to buy the second biggest house in his home town, but now he was also co-owner of the rowdy, successful Globe Theatre, which was attracting huge audiences of over 1 500 paying customers to each performance.

Shakespeare was working hard for his success, though; in addition to acting and directing performances, running the business side of the theatre, commuting between his work in London and his family in the country, he was churning out a brand-new play every few months. Not bad for a high school dropout from a small obscure town who married a scandalously older woman whom he had made pregnant as a penniless, lusty 18-year-old.

Shakespeare seems to have been hungry for success. Around the time of his 21<sup>st</sup> birthday, he left his wife and three children with his parents and headed to London to seek his fortune. The movies of their time, plays were rapidly growing in popularity and the theatre was a booming industry — the Hollywood of its day. Whether it was his intention when he left home or not, it’s perhaps not surprising that a young man like Shakespeare should be attracted to such an exciting, vibrant new industry — where fame could be won and vast amounts of money could be made.

It is likely he spent his first few years in the industry learning his craft by acting and writing for several companies of actors, including Lord Strange’s Men and the Queen’s Men. It didn’t take him long to make his mark, though, and he penned the first of his plays — *Henry VI, Part One* — a couple of years later around 1589, when he was in his mid-twenties. The play was met with huge acclaim and was the start of a prolific writing career that produced an incredible 37 plays and 154 sonnets before his death in 1616.

While the mystery of Shakespeare’s genius is something we will probably never solve, it seems likely that he must have been writing poems and stories from a young age. It is slightly improbable to think he could suddenly write something as accomplished and insightful as the three *Henry VI* plays in his early twenties without years of practice beforehand.



© Dall-E-2 (OpenAI)

*Shakespeare knew how to entertain bawdy Elizabethan audiences. His humour was not limited to witty puns and his plays are riddled with dirty jokes and sexual innuendo.*



### The apprentice

Established in 1563, the apprenticeship system stated that every craftsman (for example, baker, brewer, butcher, blacksmith) had to learn his trade for seven years under a responsible master. It was argued that ‘until a man grow [sic] into 23 years, he, for the most part, though not always, is wild, without judgement and not of sufficient experience to govern himself’.



*Illustration of a mediaeval baker and his apprentice from The Mediaeval Cookbook by M. Black.*



### Why do some people call him ‘The Bard’?

Bard is a mediaeval Gaelic/British term for a professional entertainer, someone who could tell stories, recite poems or compose music. Shakespeare is sometimes called ‘The Bard’ in recognition of his stature and (unofficial) standing as the greatest poet of England.

*‘Our speech is like honey when we tell a tale ...’ An artist’s impression of two musician bards or minstrels with their lutes.*





Example of a timber-framed Elizabethan house on Rother Street in Shakespeare's home town of Stratford.

## The early years

Despite being one of the most popular and widely read English-language authors ever to have lived, Shakespeare remains a man shrouded in mystery. He achieved tremendous fame and fortune, frequently performed for both Queen Elizabeth I and King James I, and yet we know extraordinarily little about him and his life.

We do not know his date of birth, only that he was baptised at the Holy Trinity Church in the town of Stratford on 26 April 1564. As baptisms usually took place a couple of days after a birth, many people like to celebrate his birthday on 23 April, which is also the day on which he died in 1616.

His parents were financially comfortable and lived in a wealthy part of town. His father, John, was a glove-maker and prominent local businessman who performed several public offices, including becoming the town's bailiff (mayor). His mother, Mary, came from an affluent family of landowners.

It is likely that young William Shakespeare attended the local grammar school, but he might not have been the most devoted student. His good friend and fellow playwright, Ben Jonson, clearly was not overly impressed with his schooling as he said that he had 'small Latin and less Greek'. When he was 14, Shakespeare had to drop out of school and help his father support the family as John had fallen into financial difficulties.

We do not know when Shakespeare decided he wanted to be an actor, but it could have been at a young age as the local school put on a classical play at the end of each term and travelling troupes of actors would have visited Stratford regularly.



A classroom in King Edward VI School in Stratford, which is believed to have been the room where Shakespeare studied between the ages of seven and 14 years old.

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### School

School was a lot tougher than it is today. Schooldays started at six in the morning and finished between five and six in the evening. There were no sport or PE lessons and no vacations, apart from the odd religious holiday. The only day learners were given off was Sunday and going to church on Sunday was compulsory. There were rigorous tests every week and failure was met with physical punishment.

*An engraving depicting a 16th century classroom, where hours were long, discipline was strict and corporal punishment was meted out swiftly.*



## Shakespeare in love

On 27 November 1582, Shakespeare hastily married Anne Hathaway, a local woman eight years his senior. She was 26 at the time and would have been considered an 'old maid', past her prime. Anne was three months pregnant on her wedding day and it would have been difficult times for the newlyweds because William was a penniless teenager and his family had fallen on hard times. Some scholars suggest that Shakespeare may have had affairs, but there is no reliable evidence of these, and he remained married to Anne until the day he died, 34 years later.



### Is Shakespeare in Love a true story?

No. It is a work of plausible fiction. There is no historical record of such a love affair ever having taken place. If it happened while he was writing *Romeo and Juliet* in 1595, it's not likely he was short of money, either, having already written nine plays and being just about to buy one of the largest properties in Stratford.

*Actor Joseph Fiennes as the struggling playwright in Shakespeare in Love. In the film, the poet is bereft of ideas for his next play until he falls in love with Viola De Lesseps after she auditions for him (dressed as a man since women were forbidden to act at the time). They begin a clandestine love affair because he is married and she is betrothed to an aristocrat, and the playwright uses their doomed relationship as inspiration to write Romeo and Juliet.*





## Trials and tribulations

We know that Shakespeare was an established, successful playwright by 1592 inadvertently because a rival, Robert Greene, jealously attacked him in one of his pamphlets, calling him an 'upstart crow'. It was not all plain sailing for the talented Shakespeare, however; an outbreak of the bubonic plague in 1592 led to the closing of the theatres for two years and this meant that the actors had to take on far less profitable and more gruelling tours around the country to earn money.

Shakespeare would have been terrified of the bubonic plague. Most Elizabethans lived in fear of the illness also known as 'the Black Death'. It was a horrible way to die (see p.13) and Shakespeare had lost brothers and sisters, as well as close friends and fellow actors, to the disease. It broke out again in 1603, killing over 33 000 people in London alone, and, yet once more, in 1608.

Shakespeare's only son, Hamnet, died at the age of 11 in 1596 and the Globe Theatre burnt down in 1613. A cannon was fired to mark the entrance of the king on stage during a performance of his latest play, *Henry VIII*, and a stray spark set the thatch roof alight (see p.20). This would have been a serious financial setback as insurance did not exist in those days.

Shakespeare would also have had to put up with regular copyright theft as there were no laws recognising or protecting an artist's rights. Rival theatre companies would send their members to watch popular plays and secretly take notes, producing unauthorised copies and performances of them as quickly as possible.



© MitchellInolte (Deviantart)

*A doctor wearing the protective costume that was in widespread use during the bubonic plague outbreaks in the 17th and 18th centuries. To prevent physical contact with infected patients, the doctors wore long raincoats, latex gloves and masks shaped like the beak of a bird. The design of the masks was deliberate because people believed that the disease was carried and spread by birds. The shape of the masks also allowed the doctors to fill the 'beak' with bundles of aromatic items like herbs. Doing so helped the doctors contend with the putrid smells emanating from the sick and the corpses. The doctors also believed that breathing in the foul air openly would make them sick.*



### Conspiracy theory

For sheer longevity, no conspiracy theory can match the belief that Shakespeare did not write the plays that have been attributed to him. The usual arguments are that his education and social standing were not good enough to have produced such extraordinary literary works. Almost every prominent Elizabethan has been suggested at one time or another as the real author of his plays.

## The life of the playwright

The new theatre industry needed a new breed of playwright and most of them would not fit our modern image of poets and intellectuals. Like Shakespeare, most were self-made men from modest backgrounds. (There were no professional female dramatists because few women were educated or allowed to enter such professions in those days.)



© National Portrait Gallery, London (Wikimedia Commons)

One of William's best friends and a successful and famous dramatist in his own right, Ben Jonson (pictured left) was a rowdy ex-soldier who killed a fellow actor in a duel and was notoriously thrown out of the royal court in 1603 for 'unruly behaviour'.

Another of Shakespeare's highly successful contemporaries, Christopher Marlowe (pictured right), was a flamboyant celebrity who had been a spy before he started writing and was killed in what appeared to be a tavern brawl — although some suggest he was assassinated by government agents for his publicly professed atheism and for publishing a pamphlet pointing out inconsistencies in the Bible.



© Corpus Christi College, Cambridge (Wikimedia Commons)



### Six times a day

*Macbeth* is thought to be one of the most produced plays of all time, with a performance beginning somewhere in the world every four hours.



'Blood will have blood.'



### From stage to screen

Think Shakespeare's plays are only found on dusty shelves in old libraries? His work has been the basis for many aspects of popular culture. If you have watched the musical *West Side Story* or films like *The Lion King*, *10 Things I Hate About You*, *She's the Man*, *Romeo Must Die* and *O*, you have seen stories originally created by The Bard himself. Some critics even suggest that *Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith* is a loose adaption of *Othello*.



Fewer characters may die in the Disney version, but the tale of Simba avenging the death of his father at the hands of his evil uncle is strikingly similar to Hamlet.

© Walt Disney Pictures

## All's well that ends well?

In 1605, Shakespeare made another astute property investment in his home town, one which doubled in value and earned him a significant annual income. A few years later, his career started drawing to a close. His final solo play, *The Tempest*, was produced in 1611 and, sometime shortly afterwards, he ceased to be a writer for his company. He retired from the theatre and returned to Stratford, where he enjoyed the last few years of his life as a well-off country gentleman and one of the town's leading figures.

William died around the time of his fifty-second birthday, on 23 April 1616. We do not know the exact cause of his death, but we are fairly certain that in the days leading up to it he suffered from a fever. Even though it may not be true, the widely held belief that he spent the last week or so of his life socialising and celebrating with his good friends, Ben Jonson and Michael Drayton, (some argue perhaps a little too hard) remains a comforting thought.

In an elegant and neat dénouement of which the great writer himself may have approved, his journey ended where it began, at the Holy Trinity Church in the small town of Stratford, where he lies buried within the chancel rail.



Statue of William Shakespeare at the centre of Leicester Square Gardens, London. The playwright is depicted pointing to a parchment offering the following sage advice: 'There is no darkness but ignorance', a quote from his play *Twelfth Night*.



### Say what?

You may not realise it, but you probably use words and phrases invented by Shakespeare every day as he contributed more than 1 500 words to English and countless phrases. Feel you 'wear your heart on your sleeve'? Want to 'break the ice' with someone you have just met? Feeling a little 'faint-hearted' or 'heartsick'? Talking about 'your own flesh and blood'? Think it is a 'foregone conclusion'? Well, you have Shakespeare to thank for that.



### Was Shakespeare on drugs?

South African scientists have analysed fragments of seventeenth century pipes found on the floor of Shakespeare's home and have discovered traces of cannabis, cocaine, and hallucinogenic nutmeg extracts high in myristic acid. If he did use any drugs, he was not the only literary genius to do so.



## Timeline

Please note that this timeline is offered only as a rough guide as the dates of many of the events are only approximate and speculative.

1564	Born in Stratford, England (birthday assumed to be 23 April)
1582	Marries Anne Hathaway on 27 November (aged 18)
1583	First child, Susanna, is born
1585	Twins, Judith and Hamnet, are born
1587-1588	Heads to London (aged 22) and starts his theatrical career
1589-1592	Establishes his career and begins to make a name for himself — writes <i>Henry VI, Parts 1, 2 and 3</i> , <i>The Comedy of Errors</i> , <i>Richard III</i> , <i>The Taming of the Shrew</i> and <i>Titus Andronicus</i>
1593	Writes <i>Venus and Adonis</i> , and begins writing <i>The Sonnets</i> , <i>Love's Labour's Lost</i> and <i>Two Gentlemen of Verona</i>
1594	Founding member of the Lord Chamberlain's Men (an acting company)
1596-1597	Hamnet dies; purchases New Place, a large house in Stratford, and writes <i>The Merchant of Venice</i> , <i>A Midsummer Night's Dream</i> , <i>Richard II</i> and <i>Romeo and Juliet</i>
1598-1599	Writes <i>As You Like It</i> , <i>Henry IV, Parts 1 and 2</i> , <i>Henry V</i> , <i>Julius Caesar</i> , <i>The Merry Wives of Windsor</i> and <i>Much Ado About Nothing</i>
1599	Globe Theatre is built (Shakespeare is a shareholder); writes <i>Troilus &amp; Cressida</i> and <i>Twelfth Night</i>
1601	Shakespeare's father dies; writes <i>Hamlet</i>
1602	Writes <i>All's Well That Ends Well</i>
1603	The Lord Chamberlain's Men become The King's Men and perform regularly at court
1604	Writes <i>Measure for Measure</i> and <i>Othello</i>
1606	Writes <i>King Lear</i> , <i>Macbeth</i> and <i>Antony and Cleopatra</i>
1608	Shakespeare's mother dies; The King's Men begin playing at the Blackfriars; writes <i>Coriolanus</i> and <i>Timon of Athens</i>
1609	<i>The Sonnets</i> are published
1609-1611	Writes <i>Cymbeline</i> , <i>Pericles, Prince of Tyre</i> , <i>The Winter's Tale</i> and <i>The Tempest</i>
1612	Retires from the theatre (aged 48) and returns to live in Stratford
1612-1616	Works on new plays with his friend, John Fletcher; they write <i>Cardenio</i> , <i>Henry VIII</i> and <i>The Two Noble Kinsmen</i>
1616	Dies on 23 April



© Phillip Watson

An artist's impression of 'New Place', the imposing house in Stratford that Shakespeare bought around 1597. The section of the house visible from the high street (pictured left) is thought to have been the playwright's 'party house' where he entertained guests and revelled. It is separated from the family home where he and his wife reared their children (pictured far right) by a courtyard and both buildings are connected by a servants' wing.



# Guide to reading Shakespeare's plays

You will probably have read several plays by Shakespeare by the time you reach Matric, so you should be reasonably familiar with his work. At Grade 12 level, however, you must study the play intensively, and this means that your approach needs to be modified accordingly. This section offers a few suggestions regarding how to get started.

## Getting started

### Watch the drama first

Shakespeare wrote for the stage. His plays were not meant to be read, but watched and heard, so it is a good idea to see the drama first, if this is possible. You may be lucky enough to attend a theatrical performance locally but watching a filmed version of the play is a suitable alternative. A film version is a good way to get an overview of the play, but be mindful when watching that the director is likely to have adapted and interpreted the play in a specific way, cutting some scenes and/or characters and even changing the order of events. There are numerous film versions of *Othello* readily available, each offering a different perspective on the story.



'Lie[...]with her—on her—what you will' (Act 4, scene 1, lines 40–42). Kenneth Branagh's Iago (right) torments Laurence Fishburne's Othello (left) with images of Desdemona and Cassio copulating in the 1995 film adaptation directed by Oliver Parker.



### Read the play from beginning to end

Read the play through from beginning to end, not worrying too much if you do not understand everything. A synopsis of the plot is useful as you need to know the basic storyline or plot before you embark on a more involved study of the play. To assist you, this resource includes: a short story of *Othello*, a summary of the plot and act-by-act summaries.

### Worry about the literary context when necessary

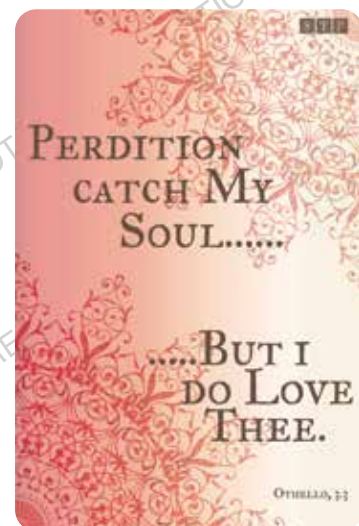
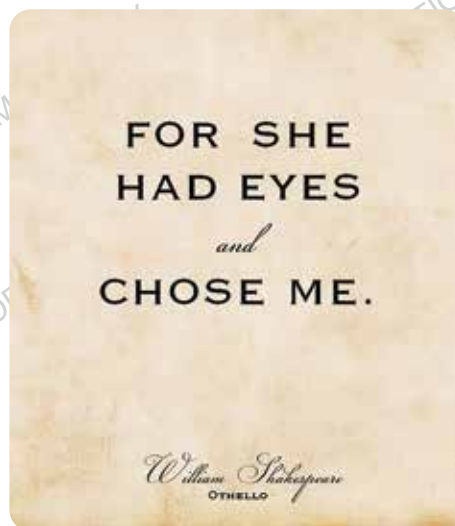
At this stage, do not worry too much about the details of the literary context within which the play is set. You can research these contextualising details as the need arises, using the 'Literary context' and 'Fast facts' about *Othello* sections in this resource.

### Get to know the characters

Identify the major and the minor characters in the play. Refer to the 'Characters analysis' section in this resource to help you sort out who is who.

### Select your quotable quotes

Obtain a dictionary of quotations or use the internet to find a selection of quotable quotes from the play. Go through the text of the play and highlight these so that you will be able to identify them in context when you reach them. Working through the play to find certain passages is a good exercise in itself as it helps you to become more familiar with the text.



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## Taking it to the next level

### Read through the play again

Now that you have done the initial groundwork, read through the play once again, from beginning to end, making notes and underlining or highlighting key passages. This will take some time and require perseverance.

If reading the entire play feels too big a task, separate it into an act-by-act and/or scene-by-scene assignment. Persevere. You do need to know this play. At the same time, try not to expect to understand everything at the first attempt, any more than it is possible to master bowling a cricket ball or playing the guitar in one lesson. Try to form an idea of the plot, themes and recurring motifs as you are doing this. Refer to the 'Themes, motifs and symbols' section of this resource to assist you.

### Draw key scenes and characters

An excellent mnemonic (aid to memory) is to draw key scenes and label them. You can do this with characters as well. Place these in prominent, visible locations in your room and look at them often. Difficult passages usually resolve themselves into something much simpler when you think about them frequently.

### Have fun acting out

A good way to learn the drama is to act it out as this 'lifts' the story off the page. Dressing up and having to memorise a few lines is great fun and an incentive to learning.

### Learn some key quotes off by heart

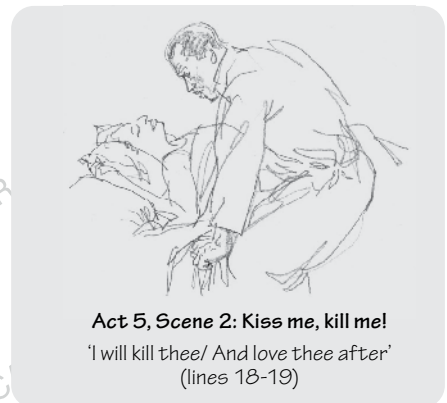
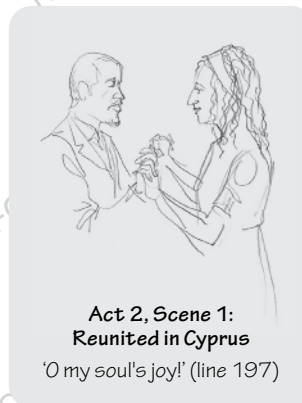
This has a dual function: firstly, it helps you to have a stock of good quotes to substantiate the points you wish to make when you write your mini essay in the final examination and, secondly, learning Shakespeare by rote or heart often gives you a 'feel' for the rhythm of the iambic pentameter line and a heightened appreciation of the verse.

### Work through the questions

Start working through the questions set on each scene and act in this resource. Leave the general essay questions until you have a more comprehensive view of the play.

## Final suggestions

Find film versions of other Shakespearean plays and watch them. You will have to be selective as some are very old-fashioned and stagey. Good productions include: Director Franco Zeffirelli's productions of *Romeo and Juliet* and *Hamlet*; *Richard III*, presented in a fascist-style 1930s milieu and starring Ian McKellen; the modernised version of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* starring Callista Flockart, and the funny and exciting, *Much Ado about Nothing*, starring Kenneth Branagh and Emma Thompson. For those who like their Shakespeare a little more graphic, there is also a chilling production of *Timon of Athens* starring Antony Hopkins.



© Gareth Hinds



It is worth listening to the audio version of the 2007 performance staged by the Donmar Warehouse and directed by Michael Grandage, starring Chiwetel Ejiofor (left) as a noble, dignified Othello who revels in the rich, musical poetry of his speeches.

© Gerald Lewis Photography (Donmar Warehouse)



Perhaps try to get hold of an audio version of the text and listen to it. Skilled readers and actors take on the roles of the characters and their emphasis, intonation, tone and general understanding of how the words form themselves into phrases and sentences can help you to get a better grasp of the meaning of the play.

Lastly, remember that 'practice makes perfect' and that this is a project, not a quick exercise. It may take you some months to feel comfortable with the play, so do not rush, do not be discouraged and remember that you are studying the work of one of the finest dramatists ever to have lived. If possible, try to enjoy the experience.

## Elizabethan and Jacobean English

Shakespeare died around 400 years and roughly twelve generations ago. English has changed considerably since then as each generation evolves and adapts the language to suit their contexts and ideas. As a result, much of Shakespeare's English is unfamiliar to our ears and yet, paradoxically, much of it is also very familiar.

One of the main reasons for this paradox is his huge personal contribution to the English language. He is estimated to have had a vocabulary of over 20 000 words (an average vocabulary is said to be between 4 000 and 5 000 words) and to have personally added more than 1 500 words to English. Another reason is the enduring popularity of his works. His plays are still performed on stage, turned into films and studied all over the world.

Despite most learners' conviction that Shakespearean English is 'Old English', it is, in fact, 'Early Modern English'. This is why most of us have no difficulty in understanding these well-known Shakespearean phrases: 'seen better days', 'a sorry sight', 'a fool's paradise' or 'strange bedfellows'.

Some of the syntax has changed over the last 400 years, of course, but perhaps the trickiest challenge facing the modern reader is not being misled by words that have altered in meaning since Elizabethan times. There are numerous examples: 'naughty' meant 'wicked' and not 'badly-behaved', for instance; 'humorous' meant 'melancholic' or 'whimsical', not 'funny', and 'presently' meant 'right away'. These shifts in meaning are why it is a good idea that we keep glossaries, marginal notes and Elizabethan dictionaries (available online) close by when studying Shakespeare's work.

## Prose and poetry

The Elizabethans did not distinguish between poetry and prose the way we do today. There was no prose 'fiction' and verse was not the special, rather difficult and idiosyncratic art form it is nowadays. Verse was a widely used form of communication in Elizabethan times and 'blank verse', the 10-beat line of unrhymed poetry, was the medium used by the playwrights of the day. Audiences expected to hear long speeches decorated with ornate figures of speech and classical allusions. Poetry was considered an appropriate way to express this heightened language.

In addition, Elizabethan playwrights like Shakespeare used poetry and prose to distinguish between aristocratic or 'upper class' characters and 'lower class' common folk. Audiences would have recognised both the social status of the speaker and the importance of the topic being discussed by the style of speech employed. Poetry would have demonstrated the noble or aristocratic status of the speaker and the gravity of the subject and, conversely, prose would have been used for comedy sequences and mundane matters, and to indicate that the speakers were from the lower classes.

### Shakespeare's sexy pirate accent

Actor Ben Crystal's recitation of Shakespeare using the original pronunciation is worth hearing and will help explain many of Shakespeare's 'rhymes' that we no longer hear and jokes that we no longer understand. Scan this QR code or visit: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y2QYGEwM1Sk>



### SHAKESPEAREAN VOCABULARY



© Mya Lixian Gosling (goodtricklebrain.com)



Among the words Shakespeare is said to have added to our language are: assassination, enmesh, dishearten, eyesore, quarrelsome, eventful, time-honoured and watchful.

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Othello and Iago illustrate Shakespeare's skilful use of poetry and prose in the play. Othello speaks in the heightened or lofty 'blank verse' (unrhymed iambic pentameter) that Shakespeare's audience would have expected and considered appropriate for a noble protagonist in a tragedy. Othello's speech may sound pretentious to our ears, but to Early Modern English listeners 400 years ago, it would have represented an ideal of eloquence, both moving and impressive, which would have befitted his 'royal' (Act 1, scene 2, line 24) lineage and tragic stature. A good example of this is his grand speech at the end of the 'temptation scene' in Act 3, in which he compares his resolve to the unalterable power of the 'compulsive' (Act 3, scene 3, line 502) sea in lines of stirring, relentless iambic rhythm:

*'Never, Iago. Like to the Pontic Sea,  
Whose icy current and compulsive course  
Ne'er feels retiring ebb, but keeps due on  
To the Propontic and the Hellespont,  
Even so my bloody thoughts, with violent pace  
Shall ne'er look back, ne'er ebb to humble love,  
Till that a capable and wide revenge  
Swallow them up. [He kneels.] Now by yond marble [//] heaven,  
In the due reverence of a sacred vow,  
I here engage my words.'  
(Act 3, scene 3, lines 501-511)*



Iago displays a linguistic versatility that reflects his ability to connect with other characters and manipulate them. He switches easily between the prose he shares with characters of middling status, such as Roderigo, and the blank verse he speaks in the company of his social superiors and in his soliloquys. He appears equally comfortable commanding and cajoling Roderigo in crass prose such as '[p]ut money in thy purse' (Act 1, scene 3, line 363) and when he is mimicking Othello's blank verse, for example, when he swears an oath to assist the general in his 'bloody business' (Act 3, scene 3, line 519) immediately after Othello has made his vow:



© Carol Pratt (Folger Theatre)

*'Witness, you ever-burning lights above,  
You elements that clip us round about,  
Witness that here Iago doth give up  
The execution of his wit, hands, heart  
To wronged Othello's service!'  
(Act 3, scene 3, lines 513-517)*

It is also interesting to note how Othello's speech changes as he becomes consumed by jealousy and rage. His loss of mental command is reflected in his loss of linguistic command. By the middle of the play, he has descended into prose and even begun muttering and verbally rambling in a disjointed fashion; for example: 'Lie with her? Lie on her? We say "lie on her" / when they belie her. Lie with her—Zounds, that's / fulsome!' (Act 4, scene 1, lines 43-45). Note how he starts mimicking Iago's crude oaths as he falls increasingly under his ensign's influence, such as 'Zounds' (Act 4, scene 1, line 44) and 'Pish!' (Act 4, scene 1, line 50).

Tellingly, Othello recovers his eloquence and grand style at the end of the play. In his speech to Lodovico and the Venetian authorities in the final scene, for example, he uses the lofty, lengthy, fluid sentences and rhetorical devices that characterised his blank verse at the beginning of the play. The noble general has recovered himself and asks not to be forgiven, but only to be assessed accurately and honestly:

*'When you shall these unlucky deeds relate,  
Speak of me as I am. Nothing extenuate,  
Nor set down aught in malice. Then must you speak  
Of one that loved not wisely, but too well;'  
(Act 5, scene 2, lines 389-392)*



© John Simpson/Tate Gallery (Wikimedia Commons)



## Poetry and prose

**Poetry and verse:** These terms refer to language that is sung, spoken or written according to a recurring pattern. It is characterised by rhyme and metre, as well as by the use of poetic diction and elaborate figures of speech. Poetry is more condensed than prose or everyday speech. It combines the freshness of ideas with the pleasure of sound. \*

Some critics differentiate between poetry and verse, suggesting that verse is mechanical and merely clever rather than profound; for example, "I Miss You" by Joanna Fuchs is certainly verse, but would you argue it is poetry?

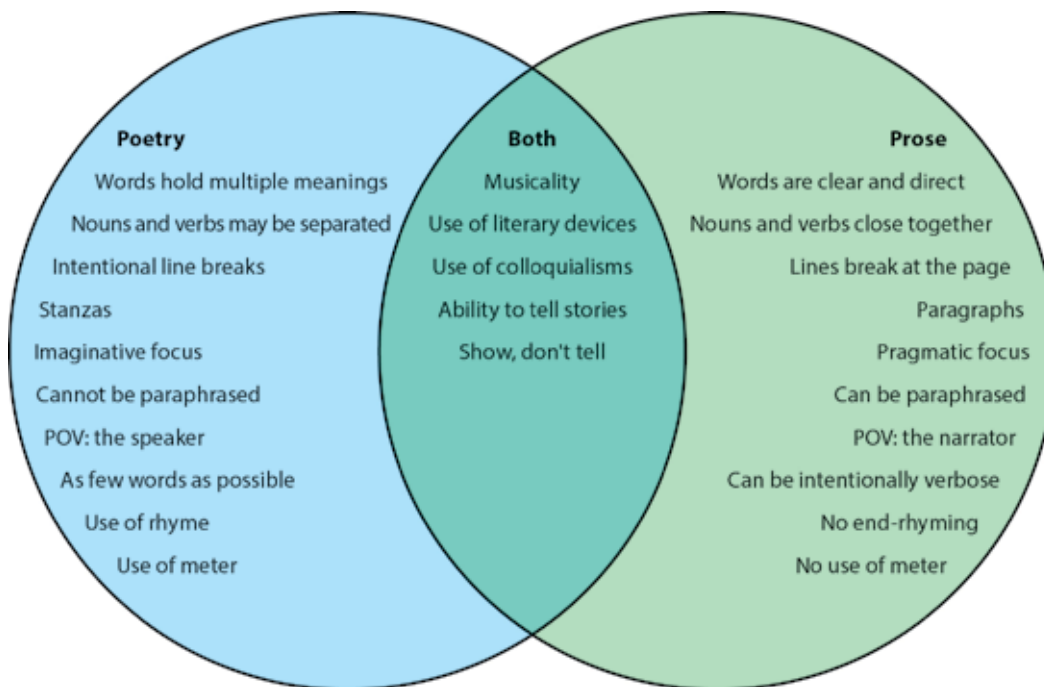
### "I Miss You"

I miss you in the morning;  
I miss you late at night.  
Just to think about you  
Is my joy and my delight.  
  
I can't wait to see you;  
Please hurry and come back.  
You always make me happy;  
You have that special knack!

**Prose:** This is a form of language not organised in the formal patterns of poetry and verse. Its main feature is the sentence rather than the line. It often uses rhythm, repetition and balance. It may use figures of speech, but less elaborate ones than those employed in poetry. Prose is used for almost every genre of literature we read today: science fiction, detective stories, love stories, biographies, travel books, plays and so on. \*

It is interesting to note that, 200 years after Shakespeare, the British poet and critic, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, explained the distinction between prose and poetry in the following way: 'prose is words in their best order; poetry is the best words in their best order'. Would you agree? (from *Specimens of the Table Talk of S.T. Coleridge* (1835) by Henry N. Coleridge).

Educator and poet, Sean Glatch, offers the following Venn diagram to summarise the differences and similarities between poetry and prose:



© Sean Glatch (Writers.com)

\* Explanation offered by *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*

# Shakespeare-related literary terms

FOREWORD

When analysing and discussing a Shakespearean play like *Othello*, there are several specific literary terms that you will need to understand and to be able to use. This section contains an alphabetical glossary of these terms, with illustrative examples from the play where necessary.

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**Aside:** A short speech or remark spoken out loud (often as a 'stage whisper') by an actor, usually still in character, and directed either at the audience or at another character in the play. It is a stage convention through which an actor can reveal to the audience his or her own thoughts or feelings — or, more commonly, those of the character he or she is playing — and the audience understands that the other characters on the stage cannot hear what is said. An aside shared between two characters can add to a comic situation or explain an aspect of the plot.



©Galerie Franck Accart (Paris)

The use of asides is particularly significant in *Othello* as Iago uses them to reveal his true thoughts and intentions to the audience privately. Iago's asides expose his dishonesty and how he is tricking and manipulating the other characters. Two examples are Iago's sneering asides in the first scene of Act 2. The first is his delighted aside as he watches Cassio greet Desdemona extravagantly when they arrive in Cyprus. He gleefully notes how he will use Cassio's courteous and refined manners against him, and how the other man will end up wishing he had rather had an enema than kiss and hold Desdemona's hand so effusively:

*'He takes her by the palm. Ay, well said; whisper.*

*With as little a web as this will I ensnare as great a fly as Cassio.*

*Ay, smile upon her, do. I will gyve thee in thine own courtship.*

*You say true, 'tis so indeed. If such tricks as these strip you*

*out of your lieutenantry, it had been better you had not*

*kissed your three fingers so oft, which now again*

*you are most apt to play the sir in. Very good; well kissed;*

*an excellent courtesy! 'Tis so, indeed. Yet again your fingers to your lips?*

*Would they were clyster pipes for your sake!'*

(Act 2, scene 1, lines 179-189)

Shortly afterwards, he watches Othello and Desdemona greet each other lovingly when they are reunited in Cyprus. He scornfully likens them to the strings of a lute (guitar) that have been tuned properly and sing sweetly and harmoniously, but which he will soon loosen and so spoil the music they make:



*'O, you are well tuned now,*

*But I'll set down the pegs that make this music,*

*As honest as I am.'*

(Act 2, scene 1, lines 215-217)

Othello also uses asides to reveal his private thoughts and feelings to the audience; for example, his anguished mental state alone with Desdemona after Iago has persuaded him of her infidelity. As he greets her, he internally exclaims, 'O, hardness to dissemble!' (Act 3, scene 4, line 31), which reveals how difficult he is finding it to be deceptive or dishonest in her presence. Soon after, he reveals how agitated he is that she cannot produce the handkerchief (which Iago maintains she has given to her lover, Cassio), warning us that his, 'mind misgives' (Act 3, scene 4, line 95).

Othello also speaks perhaps the most ominous aside in the play when he hears Cassio cry out in pain after being ambushed by Roderigo and Iago. We learn with horror how determined he is to follow Iago's example and murder Desdemona:





© Restone Maambo

*'Tis he! O brave Iago, honest and just,  
That hast such noble sense of thy friend's wrong!  
Thou teachest me.—Minion, your dear lies dead,  
And your unblest fate hies. Strumpet, I come.  
Forth of my heart those charms, thine eyes, are blotted.  
Thy bed, lust-stained, shall with lust's blood be spotted.'*

(Act 5, scene 1, lines 33-38)

**Blank Verse:** This is a term used to refer to unrhymed lines of iambic pentameter verse (see **iambic Pentameter**).

**Caesura:** (See **iambic Pentameter**).

**Chorus:** In classical Greek drama, a chorus is a group of actors who sing, dance and make comments on the action of the play. The convention is sometimes adapted by Shakespeare to introduce the setting and action of a play through a 'one-person' chorus. Typically, the chorus opens the play with a **prologue**, which sets the scene, mood and tone for the drama to come, and 'ties up all the loose ends' at the conclusion of the play with an **epilogue**.



© Ervin A. Johnson

**Dramatic irony** occurs when the audience knows more about the situation in which a character finds him or herself than the character does, foreseeing an outcome contrary to the one the character expects. Much of the plot of *Othello* hinges on dramatic irony: Othello trusts Iago, but the audience knows that Iago is deceitful and is plotting against him, which creates dramatic irony throughout the play. A significant example is when Iago arranges for Othello to watch him talking to Cassio out of earshot in Act 4, scene 1. As he watches, Othello assumes that Cassio is referring to Desdemona, but the audience knows that Cassio is actually discussing another woman, Bianca:

*'Now he tells how she plucked him to my chamber.—  
O, I see that nose of yours, but not that dog I shall throw it to!'*  
(Act 4, scene 1, lines 155-156)

**End-stopped lines** occur when a sentence or phrase is completed at the end of a line of verse and are usually indicated by a full stop at the end of the line.

**Enjambed or run-on lines** do not stop at the end of the line of verse, but flow over into the next line. They are used to mimic or recreate the effect of the natural rhythms of speech. Blank verse can sound unnaturally rigid when too many end-stopped lines are used.

**Epilogue:** (see also **Chorus**) This is a speech delivered either by the chorus or by a character at the end of the play. It is addressed to the audience directly.

**Humour/comic relief:** This is used to lighten the atmosphere and to let the audience relax after (or sometimes even during) scenes of emotional intensity. While much of the humour in *Othello* is provided by the quick-witted Iago, Shakespeare does offer the audience some light relief from the rapidly building tension on the island of Cyprus through the introduction of the Clown, the comic servant of Othello and Desdemona.

In the first scene of Act 3, the Clown arrives to ask the musicians to stop playing outside Othello's quarters. He dismisses the musicians with a series of sexual innuendoes and bawdy puns, suggesting that their playing is distracting Othello from his romantic entanglement with Desdemona. He also converts Cassio's request to speak with Emilia into an opportunity to cast a suggestive sexual aspersion on her.

*'She is stirring, sir. If she will stir hither, I shall seem to / notify unto her.'*  
(Act 3, scene 1, lines 28-29)

The Clown reappears in scene 4 of Act 3 and uses a series of deliberate humorous misunderstandings and witty puns to frustrate Desdemona in her desire to know where Cassio is staying.



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**Iambic pentameter** is a metrical unit consisting of 10 syllables, broken down into feet, each of which has one stressed and one unstressed syllable (˘ ˊ). It is the meter most commonly used in English poetry as it comes closest to the rhythms of normal speech. In an iambic foot, the unstressed syllable comes first, followed by the stressed syllable. The emphasis in the first foot of a line is sometimes reversed to catch the attention of the audience. In such instances, when the first syllable is stressed, the meter is called **trochaic**, not iambic. If there is a syllable too many in a line, it is usually an unstressed one and the line then has a **feminine ending**. Any pauses in the line, normally indicated by full stops, commas or dashes, are called **caesuras**. These are often used for dramatic effect.

Most of *Othello* is written in iambic pentameter (see also the notes on **Poetry and prose** on page 25). One of the most moving examples of its use is Othello's speech at the start of the final scene. Known as the 'It is the cause' soliloquy, his tormented speech reveals why he believes she must die, how he will kill her, and how miserable he is regarding the entire situation. The use of iambic pentameter imbues the speech with a refined, solemn gravitas worthy of the circumstances.

*'It is the cause, it is the cause, my soul.  
Let me not name it to you, you chaste stars.  
It is the cause. Yet I'll not shed her blood,  
Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow,  
And smooth as monumental alabaster.  
Yet she must die, else she'll betray more men.  
Put out the light, and then put out the light.'  
(Act 5, scene 2, lines 1-7)*



© Geraint Lewis Photography (Donmar Warehouse)

**Lyric verse** and/or **songs** can be used either to lighten the tone and mood of the play or to enhance the effect of a tender moment. Shakespeare uses songs to achieve both effects in *Othello*. In Act 2, scene 3, Iago sings drinking songs in order to encourage (and pressurise) Cassio to have a glass of wine with him. The songs are jolly, rowdy tunes that lighten the mood and celebrate the joys of drinking. Predictably, Iago's ruse works, and Cassio gets drunk. The songs would have entertained Shakespeare's audiences thoroughly because they were both well-known and popular in London at the time. Iago's first song, for example, suggests that life is short and so you might as well drink and enjoy it:

*'And let me the cannikin clink, clink,  
And let me the cannikin clink.  
A soldier's a man,  
O, man's life's but a span,  
Why, then, let a soldier drink.'  
(Act 2, scene 3, lines 63-67)*



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In Act 4, scene 3, Desdemona sings a song about a willow tree. The song allows her to express her sorrow and heightens the tenderness of the moment. The song also foreshadows what is to follow as the willow is a symbol for grief and unrequited love, and the lyrics of the song describe a sorrowful woman who loves her man to the point of accepting her death (i.e. wearing a garland made of willow) and asking everyone to forgive him for his crime. Knowing that Othello has told Iago he is determined to kill her that night, the audience is presented with the tragic spectacle of a vulnerable, innocent woman singing softly as she unknowingly awaits her violent fate.

*'The poor soul sat sighing by a sycamore tree'  
(Act 4, scene 3, line 42)*

**Prologue:** This is the introductory section of the play, usually taking the form of a speech delivered by an actor or the chorus and addressed to the audience directly.



**Prose** may be used for mundane situations, for characters of 'low' status, like servants, for comic characters or for people of higher rank in more 'relaxed' moments (see the notes on **Poetry and prose** on page 25 for more detailed discussion).

**Rhyming Couplets** are two consecutive lines of rhyming verse. The melodic effect of the close repetition draws the attention of the audience to the words being spoken and makes the lines more powerful and memorable.

Shakespeare often uses rhyming couplets for emphasis and closure; for example, Brabantio's last words in the play are to warn Othello about his daughter's duplicity: 'Look to her, Moor, if thou hast eyes to see. / She has deceived her father, and may thee.' (Act 1, scene 3, lines 315-316). The rhyme adds emphasis to his ominous warning, highlighting the significance of his words and that these are his final thoughts.

Shakespeare also regularly uses rhyming couplets to signify that a scene has ended; for example, Iago's chilling conclusion to the second Act in which he decides to have Othello witness Cassio soliciting Desdemona to bring his evil plot to fruition: 'Ay, that's the way. / Dull not device by coldness and delay.' (Act 2, scene 3, lines 381-382). Similarly, Iago's portentous observation at the end of the penultimate scene:

*'This is the night  
That either makes me or fordoes me quite.'*  
(Act 5, scene 1, lines 140-141).

**Soliloquy:** This is a monologue in which an actor, typically alone on the stage, unfolds his thoughts or meditates on a problem, sharing his ideas with the audience. The device can seem artificial to modern audiences but was necessary and understood in Elizabethan theatres. The modern equivalent is the 'voice over' used in films and TV shows to achieve the same effect. Soliloquies are opportunities for us to see sides of characters that are not revealed in dialogue.

There are several soliloquies in *Othello*, and it is worth paying particular attention to these as you study the play as each one is significant. For example, Iago concludes the first act with one in which he reiterates his desire to destroy Othello and outlines his plan to use Cassio and Desdemona to do so. His monologue at the end of Act 1, scene 3, expands on the sentiments he expressed at the beginning of the play, confirms him as the villain and sets the plot in motion.

Iago continues to use soliloquies to develop his plan and explain his actions throughout the play. He does this at the end of Act 2, scene 1, for example, and, perhaps most famously, at the end of Act 2, scene 3, when he challenges the audience and argues that he cannot be judged as a villain for suggesting to Cassio that he ask Desdemona to petition Othello to reinstate him since, on the face of it, it is a completely reasonable course of action. Yet he cannot resist revelling in his fiendish plan and delights in describing how he is going to use this to convince Othello that his innocent, virtuous wife is being unfaithful.

**Trochaic meter** is the opposite of iambic meter and consists of a stressed and an unstressed syllable per foot (") (see **iambic pentameter**).



#### How am I then a villain?

Scan this QR code to watch actor Kenneth Branagh's wonderful rendition of Iago's famous 'How am I then a villain?' soliloquy from Oliver Parker's 1995 film adaptation of the play. (The clip can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H3De429jdIE>)

Please note that this version includes kinetic typography (animated words) as well. If the words are more distracting than helpful, there are other versions of the speech available; for example: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V82rzXwvJKE>



© Sony Pictures



#### Put out the light

Of course, mention must also be made of Othello's famous and poignant 'It is the cause' soliloquy at the start of the final scene in which he convinces himself that he must murder Desdemona and reveals his deep sorrow at what he believes he must do. Scan this QR code to watch actor Laurence Fishburne's emotional, moving performance of the soliloquy, also from Oliver Parker's 1995 film adaptation of the play. (The clip can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uo5QrSsH618>)



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# Background to the play

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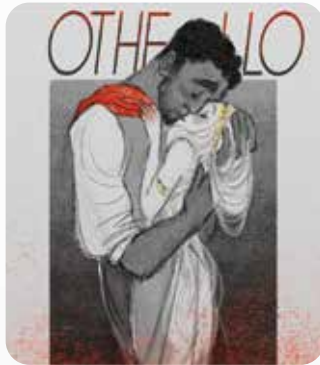
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## Fast facts

A quick reference guide to the key details of Othello.



**Full title:** *The Tragedy of Othello, the Moor of Venice*

**Author:** William Shakespeare

**Type of work:** Play

**Genre:** Tragedy

**Language:** English

**Composed (place and time):** England, between 1601-1604

**Published:** 1622 in quarto format, and then in 1623 in folio format.

**Tone:** Cynical, suspicious, dark

**Setting:** Venice and Cyprus

**Protagonist:** Othello

**Antagonist:** Iago

**Conflict:** Iago seeks revenge against Othello for promoting Cassio instead of him and for supposedly sleeping with his wife, Emilia. He tricks Othello into believing that his wife, Desdemona, is having an affair with Cassio.

**Rising action:** Iago alerts Brabantio to Desdemona's elopement and incites his anger. Iago pressures Cassio into drinking and provokes a fight. Cassio is demoted. Iago persuades Cassio to ask Desdemona to plead for his reinstatement with Othello.

**Climax:** Iago alleges Cassio talked in his sleep about making love to Desdemona and wiped his beard with her handkerchief. Enraged, Othello vows to kill Desdemona. Iago agrees to kill Cassio.

**Falling action:** Othello secretly watches Iago conversing with Cassio and is convinced of Desdemona's affair. He strikes Desdemona publicly and accuses her of being unfaithful, while Iago manipulates Roderigo into attempting to kill Cassio.

**Conclusion:** Iago wounds Cassio and Roderigo. Othello kills Desdemona. Emilia reveals Iago's deception. Iago kills Emilia. Othello wounds Iago and kills himself. Iago is arrested and sentenced to death.

**Foreshadowing:** Brabantio's warning to Othello in Act 1, scene 3, is an ironic foreshadowing of Othello's violent betrayal of Desdemona; the violent storm in Act 2, scene 1, foreshadows Othello's violent madness; Iago warning Othello about the dangers of jealousy in Act 3, scene 3; Othello describing the chaos that will transpire should he no longer love Desdemona in Act 3, scene 3; Othello warning Desdemona that the handkerchief makes husbands loathe their wives if lost in Act 3, scene 4; Desdemona requesting to be buried in her wedding sheets in Act 4, scene 3; Desdemona singing the Willow Song in Act 4, scene 3.

**Major themes:** Jealousy, racism, love, appearances versus reality, gender.

**Major symbols and motifs:** the handkerchief, 'the Moor', animals, the willow song, the wedding bed, colours.

# 'O, beware, my lord, of jealousy! It is the green-eyed monster': A short story of *Othello*

Othello tells the tragic tale of 'the Moor of Venice': a noble black general in the Venetian army who is manipulated into murdering his beautiful young white wife. Iago, a man the general considers a close friend, plots his downfall after he promotes another soldier, Cassio, as his second-in-command instead of Iago. When Othello elopes with Desdemona, a pretty, rich and much younger white girl, without her father's knowledge, Iago successfully uses the racism and promiscuity of Venetian society and, later, Othello's own sexual jealousy against him. By goading and provoking the general's jealousy, Iago torments Othello and convinces him that his beloved Desdemona and Cassio are having an affair. Eventually, the noble general succumbs to his roused passions and murders his wife in a fit of jealous rage. When the sickening truth is revealed by Iago's wife, Emilia, Othello is distraught, but accepts his fate stoically and commits suicide.

## OTHELLO



For those of you in a serious hurry to grasp the very basics of the plot, the above is a flippant three panel cartoon summary.

### A father's fury



© Brian Gornov

The play opens at night in Venice. Iago, a manipulative and cunning officer in the Venetian army, plots to ruin the life of his commanding officer, Othello. Iago is resentful that Othello has passed him over for a promotion and instead chosen Cassio, a young and inexperienced soldier, as his lieutenant or second-in-command. Iago manipulates a young Venetian nobleman, Roderigo, into helping him by promising the love-sick young man that he will help him win the affections of Desdemona, Othello's new bride. Iago and Roderigo wake Desdemona's father, the senator Brabantio, and tell him that his daughter has eloped with Othello. This news enrages Brabantio, who organises an armed band to search for Othello.

*'I am one, sir, that comes to tell you your daughter  
and the Moor are now making the beast with two backs.'*

(Act 1, scene 1, lines 124-125)

Iago warns Othello that Brabantio is looking for him. Cassio tells Othello the Duke of Venice has summoned him to discuss the threat of a Turkish invasion of the Venetian colony of Cyprus. Brabantio arrives to apprehend Othello for eloping with his daughter. Othello persuades him to accompany him to the court of the Duke and present his grievance there.



© Photo 33017144 © Joruba | Dreamstime.com

Brabantio accuses Othello of bewitching his daughter. The Duke asks for evidence and Othello suggests that Desdemona be summoned to speak for herself. Othello and Desdemona describe their courtship and love, which vindicates Othello. The Duke is satisfied and commands Othello to set sail for Cyprus to defend the colony.

Undaunted, Iago continues to plot his revenge, deciding that he will convince Othello that Desdemona is having an affair with Cassio and use this ruse to ruin both men.

*'I have 't. It is engendered. Hell and night  
Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light.'*

(Act 1, scene 3, lines 426-427)

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## Cassio's ruin

Othello and his entourage, including Desdemona, Cassio and Iago, arrive in Cyprus. They are greeted with the news that the Turkish fleet has been destroyed by a violent storm and Othello declares a public holiday to celebrate. Iago continues to plot against Othello. He persuades Cassio to drink too much at the celebration, hoping that Cassio will get into a fight and lose his position as lieutenant. Iago's plan works: Roderigo successfully provokes Cassio into a drunken brawl, resulting in his demotion.

Iago convinces Cassio that he should ask Desdemona to speak to Othello on his behalf and implore Othello to forgive Cassio and reinstate him as lieutenant. Iago then reveals that the next step in his plan is to persuade Othello that Desdemona supports Cassio's reinstatement because he is her lover.

## The handkerchief

Iago arranges for Othello to see Cassio and Desdemona talking. At the sight of Othello, Cassio leaves hastily and Iago suggests that this behaviour is suspicious. Iago begins planting seeds of distrust in Othello's mind. Desdemona pleads with Othello on Cassio's behalf, describing Cassio's good qualities. Desdemona loses a handkerchief given to her by Othello. Emilia finds it and gives it to Iago, who plants it in Cassio's room.

Iago continues to manipulate Othello, who reluctantly begins to entertain the idea of Desdemona's infidelity. Angrily, Othello demands that Iago provide proof of her unfaithfulness. Iago alleges that Cassio spoke in his sleep about making love to Desdemona and that he has the handkerchief Othello gave Desdemona. Othello is persuaded by Iago's evidence and consumed with jealousy and humiliation. He decides to restore his and Desdemona's honour by killing her. Iago agrees to help him and kill Cassio. Othello repays his loyalty by appointing him as his lieutenant.

*'Damn her, lewd minx! O, damn her, damn her!*

*Come, go with me apart. I will withdraw*

*To furnish me with some swift means of death*

*For the fair devil. Now art thou my lieutenant.'*

*(Act 3, scene 3, lines 527-530)*

Innocently, Desdemona continues to ask Othello to reinstate Cassio, but he angrily confronts her about the handkerchief instead. She is confused and upset by his demeanour and confesses that she does not have it with her. Meanwhile, Cassio discovers the handkerchief and asks his mistress, Bianca, to copy its beautiful embroidery before he returns it to its owner.

## Ocular proof

Iago taunts Othello with images of Desdemona's apparent infidelity. He suggests that Othello hide and watch him talking with Cassio about Desdemona for further proof. Othello agrees, but once he is out of earshot, Iago deceives him by asking Cassio about Bianca instead. Othello is fooled by the display, especially when he witnesses Bianca arrive and angrily return the handkerchief to Cassio,

believing it to be a token from another lover. Othello's fury grows and he decides he must kill Desdemona that evening. Iago persuades him that strangling her in their matrimonial bed would be a fitting resolution and Othello agrees. Iago says he will kill Cassio before midnight.

Lodovico arrives from Venice with orders for Othello to return and leave Cassio in charge of Cyprus. Desdemona says she is pleased by the news, which Othello misinterprets. He strikes her in front of everyone and rudely dismisses her, before storming off in a jealous rage. Lodovico is startled by his behaviour.

*'O, devil, devil!*

*If that the Earth could teem with woman's tears,*

*Each drop she falls would prove a crocodile.*

*Out of my sight!*

*(Act 4, scene 1, lines 262-265)*



© National Theatre UK



© Eugène Delacroix (Brooklyn Museum) (Wikimedia Commons)

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Othello denounces Desdemona and calls her a sex worker. He treats her lady-in-waiting, Emilia, like the owner of a brothel and Desdemona as one of Emilia's employees. Distraught, Desdemona turns to Iago for help, and he reassures her. Iago convinces Roderigo that he must murder Cassio as a way of preventing Othello from leaving Cyprus and, thus, ensuring Desdemona stays.

### Death and desolation

Roderigo attempts to murder Cassio at night. He fails and so Iago wounds him and Cassio. Othello hears Cassio cry out and assumes Iago has killed him in accordance with their plan. He resolves to return home to murder Desdemona. She is asleep when he enters the bedchamber. He kisses her, wakes her, and again charges her with infidelity. She protests her innocence, but he ignores her pleas, smothering her face and suffocating her.

Emilia arrives to tell Othello about the violence in the streets and interrupts him. Desdemona cries out and Emilia discovers that she is dying. She asks Desdemona who has suffocated her, and Desdemona claims she has done it to herself. This angers Othello who admits to killing her because of her infidelity. Emilia is bewildered and Othello explains how Iago helped him realise she was unfaithful.

Emilia's cries summon the others, including Iago. Under pressure, Iago admits that he did tell Othello that Desdemona and Cassio were having an affair. When Othello suggests that the handkerchief is proof of the affair, Emilia realises what Iago has done and denounces him. She reveals the truth about the handkerchief. Horrified, Othello tries to kill Iago, but is disarmed. Iago kills Emilia. He escapes but is captured and brought back. Lodovico produces letters written by Roderigo that reveal Iago's plotting with him and Iago's instructions to kill Cassio. The truth is laid bare, and Othello is arrested. Filled with remorse and shame, Othello stabs himself and dies on the bed beside Desdemona. Iago is taken away to be tortured and killed.

*'I kissed thee ere I killed thee. No way but this,*

*Killing myself, to die upon a kiss.'*

(Act 5, scene 2, lines 407-408)



© Jim Cox (Old Globe Theatre)

# Plot structure

Analysing the plot (the sequence of events that move the action) of a play can be especially useful when you are reading through it. Doing so can help you to understand the action as purposeful, connected and moving towards a logical conclusion, rather than seeing the play as a haphazard collection of apparently random episodes.

Ancient Greek writers, such as Aristoteles Stagiritis (Aristotle), and Roman poets like Quintus Horatius Flaccus (Horace), proposed and developed ideas regarding the **plot** and structure of literary works. In his work, *Poetics*, written around 335 BCE and the earliest surviving work of literary theory in the Western tradition, Aristotle analysed Greek plays or dramas (tragedies). He described the typical structure of a tragedy as a 'whole' made from three parts: a 'beginning' (or exposition), a 'middle' (or complication), and an 'end' (or resolution). In his work *Ars Poetica*, written in 19 BCE, Horace also discussed the importance of structure and unity in literary works like poems. He proposed enticing the audience into the plot by starting 'in the middle' of a story and was vehemently against *deus ex machina* or abrupt, tidy plot resolutions where a supernatural being or god suddenly appears and solves everything or endings in which something implausible or improbable happens. Horace also stressed the importance of dramatic continuity (logical coherence or cause-and-effect) between events in a plot.



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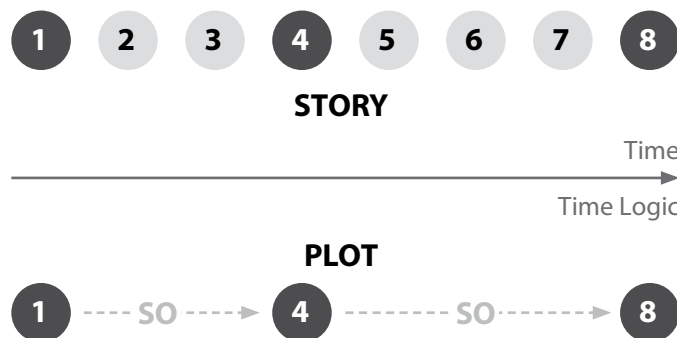
'Time will bring to light whatever is hidden; it will cover up and conceal what is now shining in splendour.' - Quintus Horatius Flaccus, *Epistles*



The *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* defines a **plot** as: the pattern of events and situations in a narrative or dramatic work, which has been selected and arranged to emphasise cause-and-effect relationships.

In *Aspects of the Novel*, author E M Forster suggests that when analysing a plot, the reader should pay attention to 'causality' (what is happening next in the story) and 'motivation' (why it is happening). In other words, he is suggesting that a reader examining a plot should look at both the sequence of events (the order in which the events occur) and at what connects the events (why certain things happen).

According to Ansen Dibell, writing instructor and author of *Plot*, a popular guide to the craft of fiction writing, plot points are moments that have *consequences* for the story. Notably, this definition suggests that a moment or scene may be outstanding and memorable, but not relevant to the plot of a story. An example of this is the iconic scene in the movie *Titanic* when Rose climbs the railing at the front of the ship and spreads her arms as if she is flying. Dibell argues that it is a remarkable, memorable moment but does not influence other events in the film and so should not be considered part of its plot.



A visual representation of Dibell's distinction between 'story' and 'plot'. The chronological events in the story are numbered from 1 to 8 at the top. The dark/emphasised circle events — 1, 4 and 8 — have consequences for the story and so are considered plot points. The plot points are also connected logically in a cause-and-effect sequence.

## Popular plot structures

A great number of dramatic and literary works use a similar structure to that used by the Ancient Greek dramatists as identified by Aristotle more than 2 000 years ago: a whole consisting of three interconnected parts, a beginning, middle and end. Likewise, most works also use the maxims regarding structure and unity as proposed by Horace.

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Most movies produced by Hollywood today, for instance, follow the same three-part structure as it is considered a way to simplify storytelling and make it easier for audiences to follow the plot. Among those responsible for inspiring its popularity in the movie industry is American writer Syd Field, who published his bestselling work *Screenplay: The Foundations of Screenwriting* in 1979. In the book, Field argues that the plot of a movie should consist of three parts in order to engage and satisfy an audience successfully. He describes the formula as: Act I, the set-up, which reveals the protagonist and his or her situation (one quarter of the total length); Act II, the confrontation, which defines the main goals of the protagonist and the obstacles to achieving these (two quarters of the total length); Act III, the resolution, which reveals whether the protagonist achieves his or her goal (one quarter of the total length).

Some critics argue that the enduring popularity of plot structures like this is because they help us to anticipate and understand what is happening and stimulate our innate desire for engagement or interest, which develops into involvement or tension and, ultimately, catharsis or release.

### Did Shakespeare use acts and scenes?

While it is not known for certain that Shakespeare divided his plays into acts, it is not unlikely since such divisions have been recorded in theatrical works since Greek and Roman theatre in the first century BCE. Acts were used to signify gaps in time in the dramas, anything from hours to days or years, and provided useful opportunities for intervals or intermissions. We do know that Renaissance playwrights like Shakespeare studied the dramatists of earlier times, especially ancient Greek dramatists like Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides and Roman dramatists like Plautus, Terence and Seneca, and were heavily influenced by them.

Many of Shakespeare's plays were published in quarto format during his lifetime and immediately afterwards, but it was only when the book now referred to as the First Folio was published in 1623 that his plays were divided into acts and scenes in print. Not only was it published seven years after Shakespeare's death, but we do not know for certain who inserted the divisions in the book. Was it Shakespeare, the actors who compiled its contents, or the editors and scribes of the publishing company?

Scholars also recognise that the nature of Elizabethan theatre suited fluid, continuous performances. Many theatres were open-air playhouses like the Globe with simple, bare stages on which the action flowed like a movie as there were no curtains to open and close. Playwrights used dialogue and handheld props to signify changes in location and time. A consequence of this simplicity was that it gave playwrights the freedom to avoid stating precisely where and when the action was happening unless absolutely necessary — an artistic licence of which Shakespeare and his contemporaries appear to have taken full advantage.

It is useful to bear this context in mind when analysing the plot structure of a Shakespearian play. While the act and scene structure is a useful framework for organising and understanding the text, it may well have been largely imposed on the work by compilers, writers and editors in the four centuries since it was written.

### Plot structure of a five-act play

Even though Shakespeare was probably more focused on the emotional and psychological tension in *Othello* than its structure, dividing the play into acts and scenes is an extremely helpful way of arranging the text in order to better comprehend the events in the story. *Othello* is considered a five-act play and these are the divisions into which the plot of a five-act play typically falls:

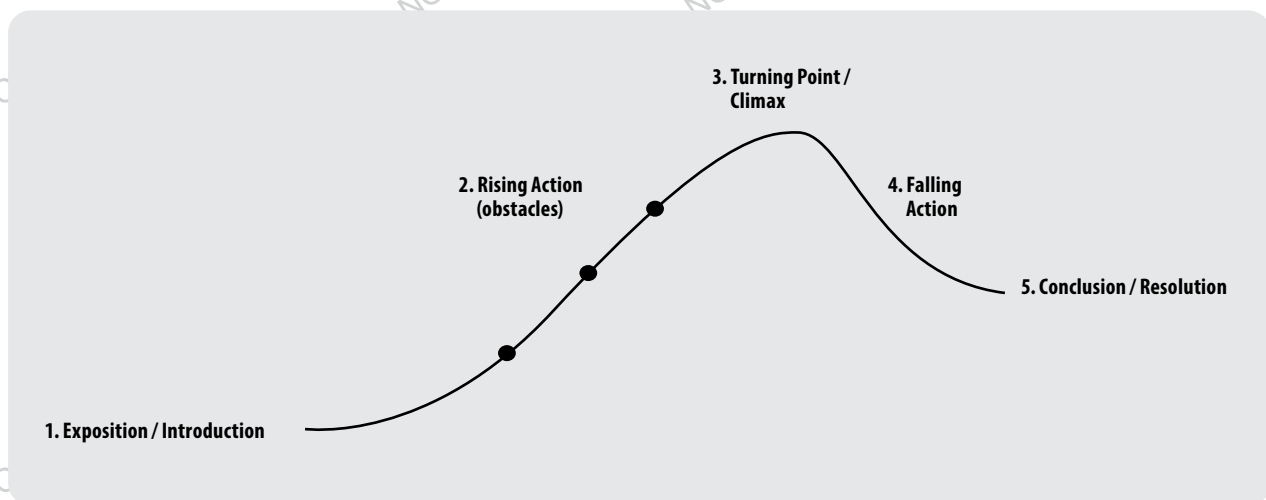


Diagram illustrating a typical five-act plot structure. This classification was refined and formalised by the German playwright and novelist Gustav Freytag in his book *Die Technik des Dramas* (The Technique of the Drama), published in 1863. Freytag developed his framework by analysing Shakespeare's plays, as well as ancient Greek and Roman dramas.



Plot structure of a five-act play	Plot of Othello
<p><b>1. Exposition/Introduction:</b></p> <p>This part of the plot introduces the main characters, usually the protagonist and the antagonist (there may be more than one protagonist and/or antagonist), establishes the relationships between these characters and introduces the situation or central conflict with which the main character is faced and will have to resolve.</p>	<p><b>1. Exposition/Introduction:</b></p> <p>Iago and his accomplice Roderigo plot against Othello. They alert Brabantio to the fact that his daughter has eloped with Othello. Brabantio is outraged and confronts Othello. The Duke summons Othello to court. At court, Brabantio and Othello present their cases to the Duke. Othello suggests Desdemona also speak for herself, which she does. The Duke supports the newlyweds. The Turks are threatening to invade Cyprus and so the Duke sends Othello to defend the island. Desdemona insists on travelling with her husband.</p>
<p><b>2. Rising Action:</b></p> <p>The 'plot thickens': the protagonist understands what he or she must achieve and works towards resolving his or her problem. He or she will face challenges and obstacles and be thwarted along the way. How the protagonist responds to these obstacles sets the stage for the rest of the drama.</p>	<p><b>2. Rising Action:</b></p> <p>A violent storm destroys the Turkish fleet. Othello and his entourage survive the storm and arrive safely in Cyprus. Othello proclaims a day of celebration. Iago manipulates Cassio into becoming drunk and fighting. Cassio wounds Montano and Othello demotes him. Iago persuades Cassio to ask Desdemona to plead for his reinstatement with Othello. Iago reveals his plan to convince Othello that Cassio and Desdemona are having an affair.</p>
<p><b>3. Turning Point/Climax:</b></p> <p>This is the focal point of the play. The protagonist makes a single critical decision. He or she is ready to engage with his or her antagonist(s) and, consequently, there will be a change — for better or for worse — in the ensuing action of the play. In a comedy and a romance, the situation will get better; in a tragedy, circumstances will deteriorate from 'bad' to 'worse'.</p>	<p><b>3. Turning Point/Climax:</b></p> <p>Iago arranges for Othello to see Cassio and Desdemona talking. Cassio leaves hastily and Iago suggests this act is suspicious. Desdemona pleads on Cassio's behalf and Iago insinuates that there is something between them. Othello starts considering Iago's insinuations. Emilia finds the handkerchief Othello gave Desdemona. She gives it to Iago. Tormented by Iago's suggestions of infidelity, Othello demands proof. Iago alleges Cassio talked in his sleep about making love to Desdemona and wiped his beard with her handkerchief. Enraged, Othello vows to kill Desdemona. Iago agrees to kill Cassio.</p>
<p><b>4. Falling Action</b></p> <p>This is a period of great tension in a play, whether a comedy, romance, or tragedy. Typically, the antagonist appears to have the upper hand and the protagonist seems to be unable to accomplish his or her goal. Loose ends start to be tied up and complications unravel. The play moves towards its conclusion.</p>	<p><b>4. Falling Action</b></p> <p>Iago continues to torment Othello with vivid descriptions of Desdemona's supposed infidelity. Iago arranges for Othello to hide and watch him talking to Cassio about Bianca. Iago tells Othello Cassio is discussing Desdemona. As Othello watches, Bianca returns the handkerchief to Cassio angrily. Othello is convinced of Desdemona's affair and his fury grows.</p> <p>Lodovico arrives with orders for Othello to return to Venice. Othello strikes Desdemona in public and denounces her as a whore to her face. Iago persuades Roderigo to kill Cassio to prevent Desdemona from leaving Cyprus with Othello.</p>
<p><b>5. Conclusion/Resolution/Dénouement/Revelation</b></p> <p>The four terms in this sub-heading all refer to the final act of the drama. There is a confrontation between the protagonist and antagonist and the problem is resolved. Usually, the characters gain insights and perhaps 'good' finally triumphs over 'evil' or perhaps a benign power takes control. Ultimately, nonetheless, moral and social order is restored.</p>	<p><b>5. Conclusion/Resolution/Dénouement/Revelation</b></p> <p>Iago wounds Cassio and Roderigo. Othello kills Desdemona. Emilia reveals Iago's deception. Iago kills Emilia. Othello kills himself. Iago is arrested and sentenced to death.</p>
<p>In a tragedy, there is great human suffering and often at least one death occurs; however, 'good' prevails and a sense of normality returns. In a comedy or romance, the crisis abates, and the situation improves for the protagonist; typically, the antagonist is defeated and there is forgiveness and reconciliation, symbolised by a marriage and/or festivity. In either case, the members of the audience experience 'catharsis' or the release of tension and anxiety.</p>	

# Summaries and analyses

## Using this section

Working through the play scene by scene ensures that solid foundations of knowledge are laid and then gradually and effectively built on. Students are not required to deal with the whole play until they have worked through it step by step. In this section, each act is broken down into its constituent scenes, each of which is summarised and analysed separately. Between reading the summary and the analysis of a scene, learners are encouraged to follow the page references provided and read the actual text of the scene. Once familiar with the scene, students are urged to engage with each scene directly through scene-specific contextual questions that require them to refer to the text closely. At the end of each act, learners will find essay questions pertaining to that specific act, accompanied by a selection of enrichment tasks.



In the Literary essay section (page 136 of this resource) that follows these summaries, there is also a wide selection of rigorous, intertextual essay topics, ensuring that students also tackle the play in its entirety. Also note that suggested answers/potential responses to the scene-specific contextual questions and marking rubrics for the enrichment tasks and essays are provided in the companion *Suggested Answers* booklet.



### Recommended process:

1. Read the scene summary (as a primer).
2. Read the actual text of the scene (making notes).
3. Read the scene analysis (formulate own opinions).
4. Answer scene-specific contextual questions (express own opinions).

## Act 1

### Act 1: Scene 1

#### Summary

The play opens at night in Venice with Roderigo expressing his anger and heartbreak over the marriage of Othello, a Moorish general, to Desdemona, the daughter of a senator. Iago, Othello's ensign, reveals his hatred of Othello for promoting Cassio as his lieutenant instead of him. They awaken Brabantio, Desdemona's father, with news of her elopement. Brabantio is enraged and suggests Othello has used witchcraft to seduce his daughter. Brabantio assembles an armed mob to apprehend Othello and Desdemona.

► Turn to page 154 and read the text of Act 1, scene 1.

#### Analysis

The opening scene launches into the action with Iago and Roderigo in the middle of a heated discussion on the streets of Venice at night. Their discussion provides insight into the natures and characters of the two men. Iago reveals his arrogance and ambition. He asserts, 'I know my price' (line 12) or value and he is adamant that he is 'worth no worse a place' (line 12) than that of Othello's lieutenant or second-in-command. The implication is that he would be a good replacement for Othello himself. Perhaps he is jealous of Othello and that is the origin of his bitterness and hatred? His opinion of his own merits is high — having proved himself on the battlefields of 'Rhodes [...] Cyprus [...] and on other grounds' (line 30) — and is starkly contrasted with his scathingly low opinion of Cassio, an 'arithmetician' (line 20) and 'counter-caster' (line 32) or bookkeeper who knows as much about battle as a 'spinster' (line 25) or woman. It is this rejection that sets in motion the desire for revenge that will drive the play to its tragic end.

Iago also reveals his quick wits and wily character. He delights in confusing Roderigo with his wordplay as he describes his plan to pretend to be loyal to Othello, while pursuing his real intention: Othello's downfall. 'I follow him to serve my turn upon him. / We cannot all be masters, nor all masters / Cannot be truly followed' (lines 44-46), he explains. 'It is as sure as you are Roderigo, / Were I the Moor I would not be Iago. / In following him, I follow but myself' (lines 59-61).

Iago puts his plan for revenge into motion at once and instructs Roderigo to wake up Desdemona's father and tell him about the elopement, hoping to stir up trouble for Othello. Iago delights in using bestial and racist imagery to shock and enrage Brabantio, telling him, 'Even now, now, very now, an old black ram / Is tupping your white ewe' (lines 93-94) and that he must act quickly



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because his daughter is being 'covered with a Barbary horse' (lines 120-121). His images have their intended effect and Brabantio becomes murderously angry, heading off with Roderigo to apprehend Desdemona and Othello.

The scene also illuminates the social structures and racism in Venetian society. Roderigo is presented as a wealthy, respectable and polite or well-manner Venetian, but he is all too happy to call Othello the 'thick-lips' (line 69) and a 'lascivious Moor' (line 135). Brabantio is even wealthier and a respected member of the senate, but he immediately suspects 'the Moor' (line 158) of using 'charms' (line 183) or witchcraft to deceive Desdemona and violate her 'maidhood' (line 184). Brabantio also alludes to the strict social conventions governing wealthy Venetian families by describing Desdemona's elopement as 'too true an evil' (line 172) and a 'treason of the blood!' (line 181) or betrayal of her entire family and lineage.

## Questions

1. What is the effect of Iago's first word being a curse or strong oath? (2)
2. Explain the meaning of the statement: 'I am not what I am' (line 68). (1)
3. Discuss the significance of Iago's use of animalistic imagery when describing Othello. (3)
4. What does Roderigo imply when he describes Othello as 'an extravagant and wheeling stranger' (line 145)? (2)
5. How does Brabantio's attitude towards Roderigo change during the scene? (2)

[10]

## Act 1: Scene 2

### Summary

Othello is summoned to appear before the Duke of Venice and his court. Brabantio, Roderigo and the mob accost Othello. Iago attempts to provoke a brawl, but Othello deescalates the situation with his calm presence and assured authority. Brabantio agrees to accompany Othello to court and present his grievance to the duke.

► Turn to page 158 and read the text of Act 1, scene 2.

### Analysis

The audience meets Othello for the first time. He appears calm and confident. When Iago warns him about Brabantio, he dismisses the threat, confidently noting that, 'My services which I have done the signiory / Shall out-tongue his complaints' (lines 20-21). He declares himself a free man with regal ancestors, who has earned his success and sovereignty and would not have surrendered his 'unhoused free condition' (line 28) if he did not truly love Desdemona. He also argues that his 'parts' (line 34) or abilities, 'title' (line 34) or status and 'perfect soul' (line 34) or clear conscience will make Brabantio consider him a worthy match for Desdemona.



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When Brabantio arrives with his mob and they draw their swords, Othello remains composed and exudes calm authority. He commands the inexperienced swordsmen to 'keep up' (line 72) or sheath their 'bright' (line 72) or unused swords rather than lose their lives, and deftly deescalates the situation with a show of courtesy and respect to Brabantio: 'Good signior, you shall more command with years / Than with your weapons' (lines 73-74). His calm civility and deference are in stark contrast to Brabantio's angry, rude accusation: 'O, thou foul thief, where hast thou stowed my daughter?' (line 75).

As Othello continues to placate Brabantio and stands his ground in the angry crowd, the image of a noble, assured black warrior surrounded by furious, hostile white swordsmen dominates the scene and creates a powerful first impression.

*'Hold your hands,*

*Both you of my inclining and the rest.*

*Were it my cue to fight, I should have known it*

*Without a prompter.'*

(Act 1, scene 2, lines 95-98)

Othello's private and public lives are revealed as the two areas of conflict in the plot: the Venetian colony of Cyprus and his marriage are both threatened, and the audience is given a clear sense of the challenges this powerful, but exotic outsider faces.



## Questions

1. Paraphrase lines 1-5 in your own words. (5)
2. Why might Iago's comments in lines 1-5 be considered ironic? (2)
3. What are the literal and figurative meanings of the phrase 'boarded a land carrack' (line 57)? (2)
5. What racial slur does Brabantio use to describe Othello? (1)

[10]

## Act 1: Scene 3

### Summary

The Duke and the senators discuss the conflicting reports regarding the movements of the Turkish fleet and conclude that its target is indeed Cyprus. When Brabantio and Othello arrive, the Duke insists on evidence to support Brabantio's accusations that Othello has bewitched his daughter. At Othello's suggestion, the Duke sends for Desdemona. While they await her arrival, Othello describes his courtship of Desdemona. When she appears, Desdemona confirms that she has married Othello because she loves him. Othello is vindicated by Desdemona's testimony and so the Duke orders him to set sail for Cyprus and grants Desdemona's request to join him. Alone with Iago, Roderigo despairs of ever winning Desdemona's love and contemplates suicide, but Iago persuades him to raise funds and pursue Desdemona to Cyprus instead. Iago formulates a plan to obtain his revenge against Othello and be appointed as his lieutenant in Cassio's place — by convincing Othello that Cassio and Desdemona are having an affair.

► Turn to page 160 and read the text of Act 1, scene 3.

### Analysis

The scene opens with the Duke and his senators discussing the military crisis. The Duke appears serious and brusque, yet circumspect. The advice he receives from his senators is good and he is not fooled by the enemy's attempts at misdirection. The way the Duke orders Othello to wage war against the 'general enemy Ottoman' (line 55) the moment he sees him makes the Duke seem like a decisive leader. His immediate recognition and greeting of 'gentle' (line 56) Brabantio suggests that he is a respectful and courteous leader as well.

Brabantio's rage appears to have dampened into heartache. He tells the Duke that he is consumed by a 'grief' (line 62) that 'swallows other sorrows' (line 63). He still makes accusations of 'witchcraft' (line 73), nonetheless, and laments that his daughter has been 'stolen' (line 69) and 'corrupted' (line 69) by 'spells and medicines' (line 70). Witchcraft was a serious crime at the time and the Duke is shaken by Brabantio's claims. He tells Brabantio that he can use the 'bloody book of law' (line 76) or death penalty in the most 'bitter' (line 77) or harshest terms against the person who has committed this crime, no matter who they are. Everyone is shocked when a grateful Brabantio gestures towards Othello and says, 'Here is the man—this Moor' (line 81).

Othello rises to the occasion and gives a speech full of eloquence, gravitas and authority. He begins respectfully and modestly, apologising for his '[r]ude' (line 92) speech and explaining that he lacks the 'soft phrase of peace' (line 93) because he has spent his life in the 'broils and battle' (line 98) of the 'tented field' (line 96) or combat zone. He asks the court for its 'gracious patience' (line 100), which he says he will reward with an 'unvarnished' (line 101) or honest account of his 'love' (line 102) and how he 'won' (line 105) Desdemona.

Othello explains that Desdemona fell in love with him after hearing him tell 'the story of my life' (line 144). He then offers the court an account of the 'battles, sieges, fortunes' (line 145) he has faced. He alludes to a mesmerising 'pilgrimage' (line 168) of 'disastrous chances' (line 149), 'moving accidents' (line 150) and 'hair-breadth scapes' (line 151) in 'antres vast' (line 155), across 'deserts idle' (line 155) and up hills 'whose heads touch heaven' (line 156). He mentions meeting 'cannibals' (line 158), the 'anthropophagi' (line 159) and of being captured and 'sold [in] to slavery' (line 153). After he had finished his tale, he says that Desdemona 'wished / [t]hat heaven had made her such a man' (lines 178-179) and told him that his story 'would woo her' (line 181). He says he acted on her hint and concludes his account of their courtship by saying that '[s]he loved me for the dangers I had passed' (line 182) and 'I loved her that she did pity them' (line 183).



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Othello's past is certainly a thrilling, exotic tale of adventures. It seems almost too colourful and outlandish to be true, but is there any reason to doubt him? He appears to have been upfront and honest so far in the play. Is it plausible that Desdemona would have fallen in love with him — a much older, foreign, black man — because of his history? Perhaps it is the dignified way he expresses himself and his nobility, in spite of how much he has 'suffered' (line 173), that appeals to her?

The Duke appears to find Othello's explanation reasonable since his immediate response is to declare, 'I think this tale would win my daughter, too' (line 186). Yet is he simply being expedient and self-serving? It would leave him with a significant problem if his trusted general were to be imprisoned or executed right now. Is it significant that he switched from supporting Brabantio with the full 'bloody book of law' (line 76) to admonishing him that 'to vouch this is no proof' (line 119) and demanding he provide evidence for his 'thin habits' (line 121) the moment he discovered that Othello was the accused?

Desdemona arrives at court and makes her first impression. Surprisingly, Brabantio does not ask her if she 'was half the wooer' (line 192) but to whom she most 'owe[s] obedience' (line 196). It is an intriguing switch of tactic that suggests he believes that it will be more to his advantage to invoke social propriety and frame her as a disobedient daughter in a room full of fathers. His question does not appear to panic her, nonetheless, and she offers a respectful, concise and logical solution in response. She addresses Brabantio as her 'noble father' (line 197) and 'the lord of duty' (line 201), and acknowledges that she is indebted to him for her 'life and education' (line 199), but she notes that she now has a 'divided duty' (line 198) and argues that husbands take preference over fathers once a woman marries. Astutely, she invokes her own mother and reminds Brabantio (and the court) that it suits a husband to have his wife chose him over her father.

Desdemona's first impression is a significant one. Considering that the play is set around the same time that it was written, the early 1600s, her short speech is a remarkably forthright and spirited one. Elizabethan women were expected to be modest, unassuming, deferential and obedient, especially young girls to their fathers. Moreover, she has been summoned to answer for her actions before the most important men in the city in the middle of the night. When she arrives, she sees that her father is enraged and grief-stricken as well, which would have been understandable as her behaviour would have been considered scandalous at the time.

The stakes are high, even more so because her husband's life is at risk. Yet Desdemona appears to be poised and composed. Her response is artful and intelligent. Ingeniously, she reminds the men that daughters become wives. She also invokes the memory of her mother directly (her use of the past tense, 'showed' (line 203), suggests her mother is dead), which is also likely to elicit sympathy, particularly from her father. Her contention could also be considered misleading, however, since it is unlikely that her mother eloped at a young age like her.



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Desdemona's argument appears to convince the gathered men. Brabantio responds somewhat dismissively, saying, 'God be with you! I have done' (line 207) and abruptly tells the Duke to return to 'state affairs' (line 208). Why does he abandon his claim against Othello so swiftly, though, without even examining the nature of their courtship and reasons for eloping? He even abandons fatherhood itself, saying she would rather 'adopt' (line 209) than 'get' (line 209) or sire a child. He tells Desdemona that he is glad she is his only child because her scandalous behaviour would make him 'tyrann[ical]' (line 215) and want to 'hang clogs' (line 216) on his other children to prevent their 'escape' (line 215).

Does Brabantio's sudden change of attitude seem reasonable? Is he being sincere when he tells Othello that he 'here do[es] give [him]' (line 211) his daughter? Many people assume that Shakespeare intended Brabantio to take Desdemona's hand and join it with Othello's at this point, enacting the traditional marriage ritual in which a father hands ownership of, and legal responsibility for, his daughter to her husband. Is he being sarcastic and critical, though? He points out to Othello that he is giving him something 'thou hast already' (line 212) and which he would 'keep from thee' (line 213) with all his heart, which suggests that he still is less than enthusiastic about the match.

Perhaps it was the Duke's earlier injunction to make the best of 'this mangled matter' (line 188) that has influenced Brabantio? The Duke may have good intentions when he offers Brabantio a series of four clichés about how the patient acceptance of loss alleviates suffering, but Brabantio dismisses his platitudes as 'gall[ing]' (line 234) and says, 'words are words. I never yet did hear / [t]hat the bruised heart was piercèd through the ear' (lines 236-237).



Does Brabantio merit any sympathy? He is woken in the middle of the night to be told his only daughter has eloped with a much older man, who is also black. He assumes witchcraft is involved because his daughter is 'a maiden never bold' (line 106) who is so modest and innocent that she '[b]lushed at herself' (line 108). He is then publicly humiliated when his daughter chooses her lover over him in front of his peers. Brabantio is certainly not the first father to have idealistic ideas about his teenage daughter and no idea what she has been doing, but this is not how any parent would like to see their child marry.

Brabantio is racist, of course. He suggests that a black man was someone that Desdemona 'feared to look on' (line 110) and describes their interracial relationship as 'err[ing] / [a]gainst all rules of nature' (lines 112 - 113), but this would have been reasonable at the time and most of the court would probably have agreed; indeed, many of the members of the audience would have as well. He appears to blame Desdemona rather than Othello, nonetheless. He disowns her and his parting words are to warn Othello that '[s]he has deceived her father, and may thee' (line 316).

Desdemona has shown herself to be headstrong and unbowed by propriety, but everyone would have been startled by her request to 'go to the war' (line 276) with Othello, especially so that she could claim her marital 'rites' (line 277) or privileges and sleep with him. Even Othello seems surprised by the suggestion and hastily assures the court that he will not let her presence and the 'light-winged toys / [o]f feathered Cupid' (lines 288-289) distract him from his 'serious and great business' (line 287). Intriguingly, he asks the court to 'voice' (line 280) their consent, but suggests this is not to 'please the palate of my appetite' (line 282) nor 'comply with heat' (line 283), in other words, not for his sexual satisfaction, but so that Desdemona will be pleased with him and consider her husband to be 'free and bounteous' (line 285). How should Othello's rather effusive speech be interpreted? Is he embarrassed by the immodesty of Desdemona's request? Is he attempting to reassert his authority and status? If he did want Desdemona to travel with him, why did he initially ask the Duke to provide 'accommodation and besort' (line 256) for her while he was gone?



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The relationship between Othello and Desdemona is an intriguing one. In addition to the age and racial disparity, Othello admits that the 'flinty and steel couch of war' (line 248) is his comfort zone and priority, and that he only 'woo[ed]' (Act 1, scene 3, line 181) Desdemona because she suggested he do so. Even the forthright Desdemona was recently so 'happy' (Act 1, scene 2, line 79) that she was 'opposite to marriage' (line 80) — even though, being 'tender' (line 79) and 'fair' (line 79), she had no shortage of suitors among the 'wealthy curled darlings' (line 81) of Venice, but 'shunned' (line 80) them all. Suddenly, though, she has transformed into a fearless, brazen woman prepared to defy her father and society, and even face the dangers of war to satisfy her passions.

The scene ends with Iago admonishing the suicidal Roderigo (one of the shunned darlings) and contemptuously dismissing his claims about the power of love. Iago argues that 'Tis in ourselves that we are thus or thus' (lines 343 - 344); in other words, that we direct our feelings and choose our passions. Comparing 'bodies' (line 344) to 'gardens' (line 344), he maintains that 'wills' (line 345) are the 'gardeners' (line 345). In a thinly-veiled sexual innuendo, he proposes that whether a body is 'sterile with idleness' (line 348) or 'manured with industry' (line 349) is the choice of the gardener. He emphatically concludes that love is merely a 'sect, or scion' (line 356), a cutting or sapling, and that reason can 'cool our raging / motions, our carnal stings, our unbitted lusts' (lines 354-355).

Iago persuades Roderigo to raise funds and follow Desdemona to 'the wars' (line 364) because her love for Othello will not last long. He offers several reasons to substantiate his claim. He argues that the 'violent commencement' (line 368) of Desdemona's feelings suggests that they are fickle, and that she will realise her mistake once 'she is sated / with his body' (lines 374-375), at which point, she will naturally want to 'change for youth' (line 374) and seek an age-appropriate lover like Roderigo. Likewise, he suggests that '[t]hese Moors' (line 370) are 'changeable in their wills' (line 371) and that the food Othello currently finds as 'luscious as locusts' (line 372) will soon taste as 'bitter as coloquintida' (line 373). Memorably, he describes their marriage as a 'frail vow' (line 379) between an 'erring barbarian' (line 379) or straying foreigner and a 'supersubtle' (line 380) or duplicitous Venetian.

Once he has convinced Roderigo, Iago reveals his true feelings and intentions in his soliloquy that concludes the scene and first act. He calls Roderigo a 'fool' (line 406) and a 'snipe' (line 408) whom he is using as a 'purse' (line 406) for 'sport and profit' (line 409). He confirms that he 'hate[s] the Moor' (line 409) and cites rumours that Othello 'twixt my sheets / '[h]as done my office' (lines 410-411). He decides to exploit Cassio's 'smooth dispose' (line 420) and Othello's 'free and open nature' (line 422) to 'abuse Othello's ear / [t]hat [Cassio] is too familiar with his wife' (lines 418-419) and ruin them both.

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## Questions

1. Paraphrase the Duke's statement in lines 11-14. (4)
2. What does ALL (everyone) saying, 'We are very sorry for't' (line 84) suggest? (2)
3. What does Desdemona mean when she says, 'I saw Othello's visage in his mind' (line 272), and what does this suggest about her attraction to him? (2)
4. What does the Duke mean when he describes Othello as 'far more fair than black' (line 313)? (1)
5. How do you interpret Iago calling Roderigo 'noble heart' (line 326)? (1)

[10]

## Essay questions on Act 1

1. Write an essay in which you discuss how the racism and prejudice Othello experiences in Venetian society is introduced in Act 1. (30)
2. Write an essay in which you discuss whether Brabantio's attitudes as a parent would be different from those held by a typical South African father today. (30)
3. Write an essay in which you state whether you agree with Othello's choice of Cassio as his lieutenant and discuss the strengths and weaknesses of both Iago and Cassio as potential candidates. (30)

[30]

## Enrichment task for Act 1

*This task is an oral and visual presentation. Your presentation should be a speech of 4-5 minutes in length, to be delivered in front of the class. You should make liberal use of visual materials, such as video clips, diagrams, posters, illustrations and other artworks to make each of your points clearer to your audience. You may work singly, in pairs or groups. Choose from one of the following tasks:*

### Option 1: Film analysis

In your presentation, compare and contrast the opening scenes in two or more filmed versions of the play. Your focus should be on how the tone and atmosphere of the film is set by the opening scenes and how these may differ from the text of the play. Consider how effective (or not) the scenes are as introductions to the tale. In your speech, take into account the following aspects: camera angles and shots, editing, lighting, setting, music, *mise-en-scène*<sup>5</sup>, and any other elements or features you might like to include. Your presentation needs to be illustrated so use clips and stills from the films to illustrate your points, wherever possible. (15)

There have been several notable film adaptations of *Othello* over the years, from Orson Welles' dark and dramatic 1951 adaptation to the filmed version of Iqbal Khan's 2015 Royal Shakespeare Theatre production, which features a black actor as Iago. Each director has chosen to introduce the story and characters in a unique way. The following theatrical posters and QR codes link to four of the adaptations available online, but you are welcome to source and use other versions.



<https://welderical.monster/movies/play/0045251-othello-1951>



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OW82AddEgZk>



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oX0cbcrMAAdo>



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1VMQMEW9aQ0>



<sup>5</sup>When applied to the cinema, *mis-en-scène* refers to everything that appears before the camera lens and its arrangement, for example, frame composition, sets, props, actors, costumes, lighting and sound. The term also refers to the positioning and movement of actors on the set, which is called 'blocking'.

### Option 2: Animal symbolism

Your task is to present symbolic animal equivalents for the following characters: Iago, Roderigo, Brabantio, Othello and Desdemona. The visual element of this exercise will entail finding appropriate portraits/images of these characters and then pairing these up with visuals of the animals that you believe represent them best. In your speech, you need to present and justify your selection of images. (15)

For inspiration, you may wish to draw on director Ang Lee's film adaptation of Yann Martel's amazing novel, *Life of Pi*. The main character, Pi Patel, is a teenage boy who survives a shipwreck only to find himself in a lifeboat with an assortment of animals: a zebra with a broken leg, an orangutan, a spotted hyena and a Bengal tiger. Pi later explains the symbolic significance of these animals; the hyena, for instance, represents the violently aggressive cook on the ship.



© 20th Century Studios

### Option 3: Moral relativism



In your presentation, discuss whether Othello and Desdemona's whirlwind romance and sudden elopement would be considered a scandal today. If you heard gossip about an older black man and wealthy teenage white girl falling in love and marrying in secret, after having known each other only a few weeks, would you find it easily believable or be sceptical about the motives of either of them? The visual element of this exercise requires finding appropriate images of contemporary examples (from real life news stories and social media posts to soap operas, reality television shows and movies). You will need to present and justify your selection of images. To do this, you should compare and contrast the words and actions of the characters in Act 1 of the play with your contemporary examples. (15)

### Option 4: Fatal attraction

Imagine that Desdemona and Othello are single and have yet to meet. Your task is to create and present dating profiles for Desdemona and Othello to use on a dating app. The imaginary profiles should focus on what each person wants in a partner and what their intentions are, what they consider their strengths, what they have to offer in a relationship, what their non-negotiable items are, what their major achievements and goals are, as well as including biographical details, interests and hobbies, favourite musical acts and movies etc. The visual element of this exercise requires finding a selection of at least three appropriate images to illustrate each of the two profiles. You will need to present and justify your selection of images. Conclude your speech by discussing how compatible you consider them to be. (15)



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[15]

## Act 2

### Act 2: Scene 1

#### Summary



Montano, the governor of Cyprus, and two Cypriot gentlemen discuss the violent storm that has shaken the island and surrounding sea. A third gentleman arrives with the news that Cassio has arrived safely and reported that the storm has destroyed the Turkish fleet. Soon after, Desdemona arrives with Iago and Emilia. Iago entertains the group with his witty banter while they await news of Othello anxiously. Cassio and Desdemona show each other affection and courteousness, which delights Iago because it suits his plan. When Othello arrives, he and Desdemona greet each other joyfully. Iago persuades Roderigo that Cassio is his main rival for the affections of Desdemona and that he should help Iago get Cassio demoted. Alone, Iago reiterates his hatred of Othello and his plan to make him jealous.

► Turn to page 170 and read the text of Act 2, scene 1.



# The literary essay

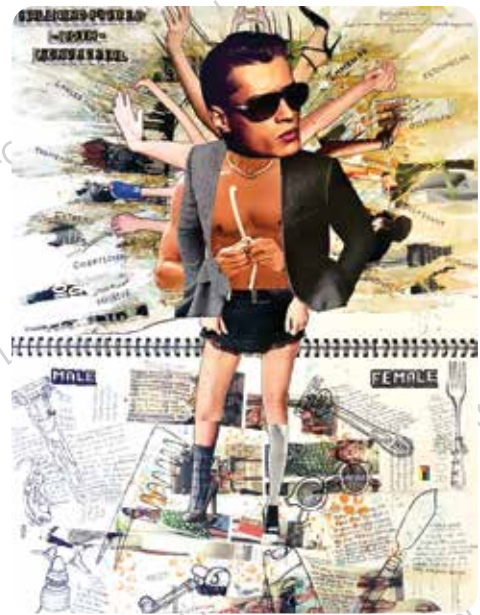
An essay is a short piece of writing that presents and develops an idea. The purpose of writing an essay is two-fold. The first reason is to demonstrate an understanding of the text in question. The second is to show that you can write about a topic in a focused and sustained way. In other words, an essay is not a rambling, disjointed collection of your thoughts regarding a topic, but an integrated and interconnected discussion that develops a clear, convincing argument. This section offers some basic guidelines on writing a literary essay, two annotated examples from which to learn, and a selection of essay topics that you can use to practise essay writing.



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## Guidelines

- Keep your writing direct, simple and unpretentious — avoid over-complicated sentence structures and unnecessarily wordy descriptions.
- Write in the Present Tense using the active voice as this helps to ensure your argument is more immediate and convincing.
- Write using a formal tone and register (i.e. avoiding slang, colloquialisms, jargon and abbreviations) as a literary essay is a piece of academic analysis, not creative writing.
- Remember that any statements you make must be supported with concrete, plausible examples and evidence from the text.
- Pay attention to the required word length, if stipulated. (In Grade 12, your essay should be approximately 600 words in length.) There is no need to include a word count at the end of your essay unless you are specifically instructed to do so. You should keep your response as concise as possible as you may be penalised if your argument strays off the topic.
- Present your essay in a neat and tidy manner as sloppy work makes a poor impression and could cost you marks, particularly if your essay is illegible or difficult to read.



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## Planning your essay

It is important to plan your **essay** thoroughly before you start writing your response. Doing so will improve your marks by helping you to clarify your ideas and to structure your argument logically. If you plan your essay properly, it can feel as if it almost writes itself.



### Common types of essay:

**Argumentative** — requires you to formulate an opinion or perspective regarding a topic, explain your reasoning and provide evidence from the text(s) to substantiate your stance. Task words for such an essay include: 'argue', 'comment on', 'motivate', 'criticise' and 'justify'.

**Discursive** — requires you to present a balanced or objective discussion of an issue or topic by identifying the information that is relevant to each of the different perspectives or opinions regarding the issue (e.g. both arguments and counter-arguments) and describing it in a logical, organised manner. Note that you may be asked to conclude your essay with an evaluation of the information and offer an opinion or be asked to provide a neutral summary of the most salient points. Task words for such an essay include: 'report', 'investigate', 'describe', 'discuss', 'explore', 'summarise', 'explain', 'illustrate' and 'distinguish'.

**Analytical** — requires you to evaluate an issue or subject by identifying the relevant information from the text(s) and re-organising it to create an appropriate response. Task words for such an essay include: 'analyse', 'assess', 'compare', 'contrast', 'examine', 'evaluate' and 'identify'.



# Writing your essay

## Step 1: Analyse the question

The most important thing to do when writing an essay is to read and analyse the question carefully. You need to make sure you clearly understand what is being asked. This might sound obvious, but many people misread essay questions and write an essay that is not relevant to the question and lose marks as a result.

The first step is to identify the task word or words (i.e. the instructions) in the question. By way of illustration, consider the following example question: *Write a well-substantiated essay in which you examine how Shakespeare uses language to create different effects in the play Othello.*

In this example, the task word is 'examine', which means that you are being asked to write an analytical essay and provide an in-depth investigation of this particular point and its implications.



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### Task words

The following list includes some of the more common task words used in essay questions and offers a suggestion of how to interpret them. These suggested interpretations should only be considered guidelines, though, and your response should always be tailored to the requirements of a specific question.

**analyse:** break down the issue or topic into its component parts and describe how each part interrelates with the others (may also be asked to relate the parts to a central theme).

**assess:** measure the value or importance of one or more aspects of a particular subject and describe the outcome of your assessment (may also be asked to relate your assessment to a central issue or theme).

**argue:** provide a logical case to prove a particular point or opinion (may also be asked to relate your argument to a central issue or theme).

**compare and contrast:** identify both the similarities and differences between two or more things or people (may also be asked to relate these people or things to a central theme).

**discuss:** provide details about, and evidence for or against, two or more different views or ideas (may also be asked to decide which views or ideas seem stronger or more credible).

**evaluate:** assess the value or importance of one or more aspects of a particular subject in order to reach and present an overall judgement or conclusion based upon it.

**examine:** provide an in-depth investigation of a particular point and its implications (may also be asked to relate the point to a central theme).

**explain:** describe how something works or show clearly how a particular conclusion is reached logically.

**explore:** consider an idea or topic broadly and present the related information in an organised manner, focusing on particularly relevant, interesting or debatable points.

**identify:** recognise the central characteristic(s) of a particular subject or issue and demonstrate how or why you reached this conclusion.

**illustrate:** provide a selection of examples from the text that describe or explain the specified topic or issue.

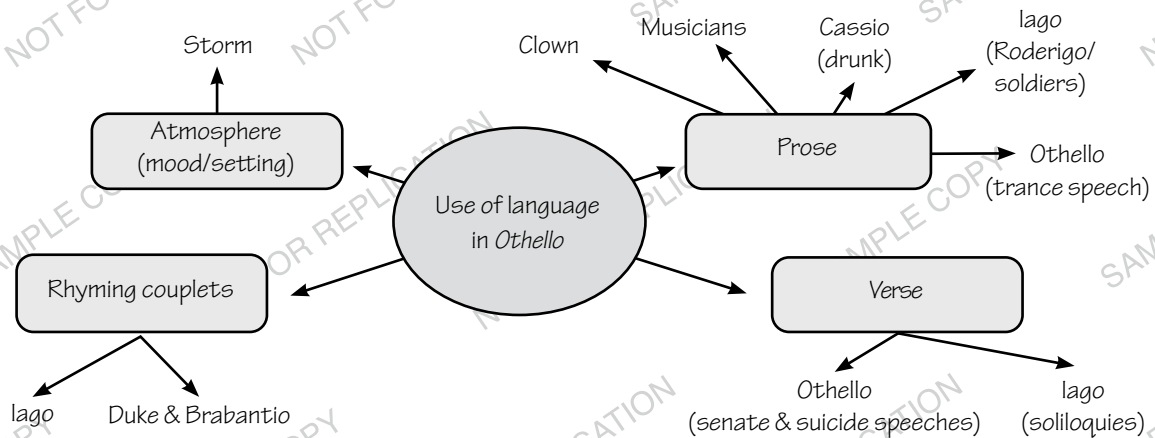
**summarise:** outline the most important points without providing any superfluous detail.



Once you have identified the task word, the second step is to consider the topic of the essay. The topic defines the theme or subject matter on which the essay should focus. Common topics include the characters in the text, their psychological motivations and relationships, the themes and motifs that inform and illuminate the text, and the author's use of language and dramatic techniques. In the preceding example, the topic focuses on the use of language and requires you to identify the different types used in the play and describe the effects created by these different styles.

## Step 2: Map your answer

You are no longer required to submit a plan with your essay and no marks are awarded for doing so; however, it is still highly recommended that you plan your response adequately. Plan your essay using any method you prefer. 'Mapping out' your response visually has been shown to be an effective way of generating, clarifying and linking ideas. An effective technique to use is a **concept map** (also known as a mind map or spider diagram). The following is a model concept map for the example question.



**Concept maps/mind maps** or spider diagrams are a way of visualising your ideas and linking these together. The slight difference between the two techniques is that, technically, mind maps are used to freely associate ideas and spider diagrams are used to organise and structure ideas into hierarchies. This minor difference makes concept or mind maps particularly useful for creatively generating or brainstorming initial ideas and spider diagrams best suited to linking related ideas together and organising and planning the argument of your essay. In practice, though, people use either of these techniques to accomplish their goals.

Both are easy and quick to make. You start by writing down your fundamental question or topic in the centre of a piece of paper and drawing a bubble around it. Next, write down the first idea that comes to mind (related to the main topic) in a space off to the side of the paper, draw a bubble around it and a line linking its bubble to the bubble around the main topic.

If your next idea is connected or related to that idea, write it down close to your first idea and draw a line between them. If the idea is not directly related, write it in a different space off to the side of the paper, and keep repeating this classification process with each idea you have.

By structuring and linking your ideas in this manner, you will create a visual map of them that you can use to plan the argument of your essay, prioritising the points you wish to make in each paragraph.



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## Step 3: Formulate your thesis statement

Once you have mapped your response, it is time to formulate your thesis statement. Your **thesis statement** is the most important part of your essay. It tells your readers how you will be answering the question and what your argument will be. Put simply, your thesis statement is how you might answer the essay question in one sentence. The rest of your essay should then argue the validity of your thesis statement convincingly. Your thesis statement should be included in both your introduction and your conclusion.



A **thesis statement** should accomplish three things:

- refer to the main topic (*Shakespeare's use of language*);
- state the main point/thesis (*a range of styles are used to create different effects*); and
- outline the body of the essay (*including majestic blank verse, dramatic rhyming couplets and lengthy passages of prose*).

Imagine you have just mapped your response to the example question about Shakespeare's use of language in *Othello* and decide that **he employs a range of styles of language to create different effects in the play**, including the majestic blank verse suited to noble characters in a tragedy; dramatic rhyming couplets that make certain statements more poignant and memorable, and lengthy passages of prose that mimic the patterns of everyday speech. Then this is your thesis statement.

### Step 4: Link your ideas together

Once you have completed your brainstorming and formulated your thesis statement, you are ready to structure your essay by linking your ideas together to form a logical, convincing argument.

Your concept map/plan should already highlight the links between your ideas. Now you need to prioritise them and decide in what order to present them. A simple way to do this is to number each idea on your plan. Depending on the number of ideas you have, you may need to select only the most relevant.

Once you have prioritised and organised your ideas, you can structure your argument and essay. There are three distinct parts to an essay that you should keep in mind when structuring: the introduction, the body and the conclusion.

### The introduction:

First impressions count! A strong, well-written and attention-grabbing introduction is critical. Your introduction should tell your reader what to expect from your essay. You need to state (i) what you will be arguing and (ii) how you will be arguing it. Be sure to include your thesis statement and a short 'preview' of what you will be covering in the body of your essay.

It is often a good idea to use key words from the topic question in your introduction as this shows that your argument is focused and relevant but avoid copying the wording of the question too closely because this suggests a lack of imagination.

While your introduction is the first thing your marker will read, it does not have to be the first thing you write. It often helps to write the body of your essay first so that you know what needs to be previewed when you write your introduction.

### The body:

The body of your essay will be where you convince the reader of your argument by substantiating your thesis statement with analyses and examples from the text. The body will consist of several paragraphs (depending on your word count), each of which expresses one point, which you then explain and support with textual evidence.

When constructing the body paragraphs, it is useful to keep the **T-E-A model** in mind:

- **'T'** represents the **Topic** sentence of your paragraph. Just as a thesis statement summarises the main argument of your essay, a topic sentence summarises the main point of that particular paragraph. Remember, you should only be making *one point per paragraph*.
- **'E'** represents your **Evidence**. In other words, the examples you use from the text to support the point you are making. You should not rely on your examples to make your argument for you, however. These should rather illustrate or prove the point you have already made (in your topic sentence). Evidence can take the form of paraphrased examples in your own words or direct quotations from the text. If you choose to quote, make sure you do so accurately (*see next section*).
- **'A'** represents your **Analysis**. In other words, the explanation of how your point is relevant to your thesis statement and how it is illustrated by your examples. Keep asking yourself: *Is the point I am making relevant to my argument? Have I made it clear to my reader how this point relates to my thesis statement?*

Another important consideration to keep in mind is the linking of your paragraphs. Ensure that each paragraph follows on from the last in a logical manner and try to avoid sudden leaps from one disparate point to another, as this can be very jarring and negatively impact on the readability and flow of your essay.

### The conclusion:

Your conclusion should provide a summary of your argument. Review the main points of your essay (perhaps considering the topic sentences of each of your paragraphs) and write three or four effective sentences that demonstrate how these points have proved the validity of your thesis statement.

Your conclusion should not simply restate your introduction, however. You need to demonstrate how your argument has progressed. Your conclusion is the last thing your marker will read before scoring your essay, so it should leave a good impression.



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## Step 5: Proofread your essay

When you have spent a fair amount of time writing an essay, the last thing you may want to do is read through it again. Yet doing so will help you identify and correct any silly errors, spelling mistakes and typos that may have crept into your text — easily made mistakes that undermine the quality of your essay and can lead to the loss of important marks. A great habit to develop is proofreading every essay you write before you hand it in. If you do not correct avoidable mistakes, it will suggest to your marker that your attitude is careless. In the classroom context, you can even ask someone else to read through your essay for you, with fresh eyes and a fresh perspective. During an examination, make sure that you leave a few minutes at the end of your allotted time to read through your essay again before handing in your paper.



### How to quote correctly

Quoting correctly is a tricky skill to master but should not prove too difficult with practice. If you are ever uncertain about quoting, remember that you can also paraphrase examples from the text (i.e. write them in your own words). This option will ensure that you still support your argument with examples from the text but avoid losing marks because of quoting incorrectly (especially in an examination context). If you choose to quote from the text in an essay, keep the following guidelines in mind:

- Quoting from the text is meant to support or illustrate your argument (i.e. the point you are trying to convey). Do not rely on the quote to make your argument for you. You need to be explicit about the significance of your quote and how it supports the point you are making.
- It is important to integrate your quote so that the entire sentence reads smoothly and coherently and is grammatically correct.
- Your quote must be copied accurately from the original text. Indicate where your quote begins and ends with the correct form of quotation marks and, if you must make slight changes to the quote so that it fits in grammatically with your own sentence, indicate these alterations with the use of square brackets.
- Use short quotations and only the word, words or lines that are necessary to support your argument. If you decide to leave unnecessary words out of the quote, indicate this with the use of ellipses and brackets [...] where you have omitted words.



### Learn from your mistakes

Before you begin writing, it may be worth reviewing your past essays and taking note of any mistakes or advice from your marker(s). Keep these pointers in mind when writing your essay and actively try to improve on these areas. Before you start writing an examination, reflect on what may have gone wrong in the past or on any bad habits your marker(s) may have identified.

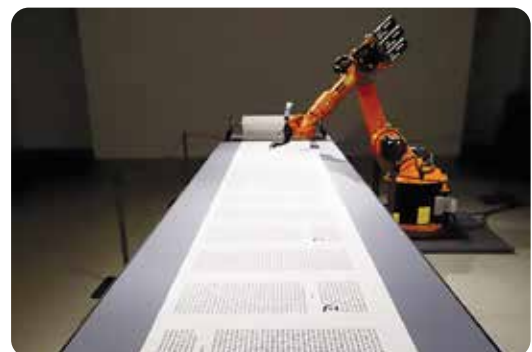


### Using online information and artificial intelligence chatbots

Remember that there are hazards and drawbacks to searching online for information or querying artificial intelligence chatbots like ChatGPT, Google Bard and Bing. Anyone can post their ideas on the internet and these ideas may not necessarily be useful or even correct. A good deal of the free information related to literary texts online is quite poor. Likewise, artificial intelligence chatbots regularly 'hallucinate' and fabricate events and exchanges/quotes that do not occur in the actual text, as well as manufacturing the secondary sources and references they cite.

If you are tempted to use online resources, nonetheless, make sure that you evaluate and cross-reference every idea, every fact and every citation thoroughly before including it in your work. Also remember that you need to reference every secondary source (website, forum, chatbot etc.) you include in your essay correctly, both in the classroom and examination context. If you do not explicitly reference ideas that are not your own, you will be guilty of plagiarism, a form of intellectual theft that is highly likely to lose you marks and is, ultimately, a serious legal offence.

Lastly, remember that your marker is interested in what you think regarding the topic or issue about which you are writing, not the ideas and opinions of a random internet source or chatbot, and will seek to reward your personal ideas the most highly — provided they are feasible and substantiated, of course.



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# Annotated essay examples

The following section features two example essays that have been written to meet the format and requirements of the IEB Grade 12 Literary essay. The essays have been annotated to emphasise the structural elements that have been used. These examples are provided for students to review and from which to learn. Please note that these example essays are offered as guidelines to the recommended formatting and structure of essays only and that students are encouraged to develop their written 'voice' (vocabulary, tone, point of view and use of syntax) by practising the skill of essay writing.

## Essay question 1:

Essay:		Comments
Question	Write a well-substantiated essay in which you <u>examine</u> how Shakespeare uses <b>language</b> to create different effects in the play <i>Othello</i> .	Note the task word ( <u>underlined</u> ). Note the topic in <b>bold</b> .
	Shakespeare employs a range of styles of language to create different effects in the play, including using the majestic 'blank verse' or unrhymed iambic pentameter that is suited to noble characters in an Elizabethan tragedy, together with dramatic rhyming couplets that make certain statements more poignant and memorable, and lengthy passages of prose that mimic the patterns of everyday speech and signify the presence of comic or lower status characters.	Introduction: makes a thesis statement, summarising the argument that is to follow.
Introduction	<b>One of the ways Shakespeare uses language is to create the setting and atmosphere or mood on stage.</b> As Elizabethan theatres were open-air stages with few props or items of scenery and no artificial lights, playwrights like Shakespeare used language to convey the setting and atmosphere to the audience. An example of this in <i>Othello</i> is the terrible storm or 'high-wrought flood' (Act 2, scene 1, line 2) that makes Montano and the Cypriot gentlemen declare they 'never did like molestation view' (Act 2, scene 1, line 16).	Topic sentence ( <b>bold</b> ), describing what will be argued in paragraph.
	Shakespeare uses prose to signify the presence of comic or lower status characters, <b>for example, when the Clown teases the Musicians at the start of Act 3, saying '[i]f you have any music that may not be heard, to 't again'</b> (Act 3, scene 1, line 15). Shakespeare has Iago speak in prose when he wants his villain to create the impression that he is talking informally, for example, with the drunken soldiers in Act 2, scene 3, and when he is taking someone into his confidence or bullying them or even both, for example, in the scene where he persuades Roderigo to both participate in his plots and fund them, repeatedly telling him to 'put money in [his] purse' (Act 1, scene 3, line 376).	Evidence ( <b>bold</b> ) presented to substantiate the topic sentence.
	Shakespeare also uses prose to signify Othello's state of mind. When he begins to fall under Iago's influence, <b>for example, Othello starts to use the other man's crude expressions like 'Zounds!' (Act 3, scene 4, line 106) and 'Pish!' (Act 4, scene 1, line 50).</b> Another example is the crazed, disjointed prose Othello utters as his mental state collapses, directly before he falls into a trance: 'Noses, ears, and / lips— <i>is 't possible? Confess—handkerchief—O, devil!</i> ' (Act 4, scene 1, lines 50-51).	Evidence ( <b>bold</b> ) presented to substantiate the topic sentence.
Body	One other way Shakespeare uses prose is to change the mood and tone during a scene. A good example of this is how Cassio speaks in verse with Othello at the start of Act 2, scene 3, but switches to prose as the scene progresses and he becomes more drunk.	Note how quotes ( <i>italics</i> ) are inserted/embedded into the sentences.

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Essay:

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As would have been expected by Shakespeare's Elizabethan audience, Othello's early speeches reflect his status as a noble character in a tragedy. He orates in lofty 'blank verse' or unrhymed iambic pentameter, which expresses his noble nature and assured, calm authority. A good example of this is when he addresses the Duke and senators of Venice, modestly asking for their forgiveness as '[r]ude am I in my speech' (Act 1, scene 3, line 92). It is also significant that his final speech is also delivered in blank verse, suggesting how he has recovered his dignity and shaken off Iago's influence, for instance, gravely asking those present to '[s]peak of me as I am. Nothing extenuate' (Act 5, scene 2, line 390).

Analysis (underlined) provided to link points being argued to the thesis statement and the essay question.

Note how quotes (*italics*) are inserted/embedded into the sentences.

Conclusion

One other notable technique Shakespeare uses is the rhyming couplet. Using a pair of lines that are the same length and that rhyme to complete a single thought makes the lines memorable and more poignant. Good examples from the play include the concluding lines of Iago's soliloquies at the end of Acts 1 and 2. In the first instance, he uses one to express his delight at devising his diabolical plan, 'I have 't. It is engendered. Hell and night / [m]ust bring this monstrous birth to the world's light' (Act 1, scene 3, lines 426-427). In the second, he uses one to express his urgency, 'Ay, that's the way. / Dull not device by coldness and delay' (Act 2, scene 3, lines 381-382).

Analysis (underlined) provided to link points being argued to the thesis statement and the essay question.

Shakespeare's skilful and versatile use of language is an important, integral part of the play. As has been demonstrated, he uses language to delight both the minds and ears of his audience, heightening the power of his imagery and the drama of key moments, as well as using it as a practical way of alerting the audience to changes in atmosphere, mood and setting.

Conclusion: summarises the main points that have been argued without restating the thesis statement.

## Essay question 2:

Essay:

Comments

Question

Write a literary essay in which you discuss the use of **imagery related to cuckoldry** in *Othello* and the role it plays in the plot. Refer to the text closely to substantiate your response.

Note the task word (underlined).  
Note the topic in **bold**.

Introduction

Shakespeare makes use of the widely held beliefs and anxieties of patriarchal Elizabethan society regarding cuckoldry for several reasons in *Othello*, including maintaining the momentum of the plot and enhancing its feasibility, providing dark humour, and also examining and challenging the truth behind such ideas and fears.

Introduction: makes a thesis statement, summarising the argument that is to follow.

Body

Iago introduces the concept of cuckoldry directly when he coaxes Roderigo to sell his possessions and follow Desdemona and Othello to Cyprus at the end of Act 1. 'If thou canst cuckold him,' (Act 1, scene 3, line 391) he assures Roderigo, 'thou dost / thyself a pleasure, me a sport' (Act 1, scene 3, lines 391-392). The irony, of course, is that part of his desire for revenge is that he believes Othello and Cassio have cuckolded him. He refers to the rumours that Othello has 'twixt my sheets / [...] done my office' (Act 1, scene 3, lines 410-411) and, again later, how he 'suspect[s] the lusty Moor / [h]ath leaped into my seat' (Act 2, scene 1, lines 312-313). In the same soliloquy, he also notes, 'I fear Cassio with my nightcap too' (Act 2, scene 1, line 324). In this way, Shakespeare uses Iago's fear that he has been humiliated by Othello and Cassio to help motivate his desire for revenge and so maintain the momentum of the plot.

Analysis (underlined) provided to link points being argued to the thesis statement and the essay question.



# The play

## A note on the text

*Choosing a version of the play can be a challenging task because there are numerous versions available that have been edited and amended in different ways, both for clarity and to suit the prevailing culture at the time.*

The variety of texts available may seem odd at first, but Shakespeare wrote his plays to be staged, not published. As far as scholars can tell, he did not authorise the printing of his plays during his lifetime — perhaps since doing so would have given rival acting companies easy access to the script and the chance to stage competing performances. As a result, most of the early printed versions of his plays were unauthorised editions acquired from actors who either obtained a handwritten copy of the play or wrote it down from memory. Consequently, the scripts were usually littered with discrepancies, errors and alterations made at the whim of the plagiarist or printer.

The text of our play is based on the version published in 2017 by The Folger Shakespeare Library. This edition is, in turn, based upon the widely accepted First Folio<sup>1</sup> version, published in 1623. Although based on The Folger Shakespeare Library version, our text differs slightly. We have agreed with many of the credible emendations of the editors of the 'Folger' version where they have altered some of the spelling, stage directions and punctuation, in particular. We have, in turn, further altered some of the spelling to keep the text in line with South African spelling conventions. These changes have been made after reading and assessing several versions of the play<sup>2</sup> and, as always, with one goal in mind: to provide modern Grade 12 students with the most accessible, yet accurate, version possible.

Changes made to the punctuation, for example, have been made either because usage has changed considerably since the Elizabethan era or because Shakespeare was actually using the punctuation to give actors hints on how to deliver their lines, rather than to assist with understanding the meaning of the lines. In either case, the punctuation has been changed where it could potentially distort the meaning of the text for modern learners. Examples of the changes made include: substituting full stops for colons, replacing semi-colons with commas, and removing capitals where none would be used today. In instances where scenes, characters or stage directions differ between versions of the play — for example, whether Othello smothers or strangles Desdemona — we have remained true to the First Folio edition.

## List of characters

OTHELLO, a 'Moor' and general in the Venetian army

DESDEMONA, a Venetian lady, daughter of Brabantio and wife of Othello

IAGO, Othello's standard-bearer (ensign), or 'ancient'

EMILIA, Iago's wife and Desdemona's attendant

CASSIO, Othello's second-in-command, or lieutenant

BIANCA, a woman in Cyprus, in love with Cassio

DUKE, the ruler or 'Doge' (chief magistrate and leader) of Venice

BRABANTIO, a Venetian Senator, father to Desdemona

LODOVICO, a Venetian noble, kinsman (blood relative) of Brabantio

GRATIANO, a Venetian noble, brother of Brabantio

RODERIGO, a wealthy Venetian gentleman, in love with Desdemona

MONTANO, the Governor of Cyprus

Senators of Venice

Gentlemen of Cyprus

CLOWN, a servant to Othello and Desdemona

Herald

Messenger

Sailor

Musicians, Soldiers, Attendants, Servants, Torchbearer

<sup>1</sup> The First Folio collection was published by friends and admirers of Shakespeare in 1623. Entitled *Mr William Shakespeare's Comedies, Histories, & Tragedies*, it includes a reasonably trustworthy collection of 36 of Shakespeare's plays.

<sup>2</sup> Other excellent versions of the play that are worth reading include the New Cambridge Shakespeare (Third Edition), Norton Critical Edition (Second Edition), and Arden Shakespeare (Third Edition).

## ACT 1

## Act 1: Scene 1

[Venice. A street at night.]

	RODERIGO	<i>Tush, never tell me!</i> I take it much unkindly That thou, Iago, who hast had my purse As if the strings were thine, shouldst know of this <sup>1</sup> .	<i>I don't believe you! (You are talking nonsense!)</i>
5	IAGO	<i>'Sblood</i> , but you'll not hear me! If ever I did dream of such a matter, Abhor me.	<i>By Christ's blood (a strong oath)</i>
	RODERIGO	Thou toldst me thou didst hold him in thy hate.	
10	IAGO	Despise me If I do not. <i>Three great ones of the city</i> , In personal <i>suit</i> to make me his lieutenant, <i>Off-capped</i> to him; and, by the faith of man, I know my price, I am worth no worse a place. But he, as loving his own pride and purposes, Evades them with a <i>bombast</i> <sup>2</sup> circumstance, Horribly stuffed with <i>epithets</i> of war, And in conclusion, <i>Nonsuits</i> my mediators. For ' <i>Certes</i> ', says he, 'I have already chose my officer.' And what was he? Forsooth, a great <i>arithmetician</i> , One Michael Cassio, a <i>Florentine</i> , A fellow almost damned in a fair wife <sup>3</sup> , That never set a squadron in the field, Nor the <i>division</i> of a battle knows More than a <i>spinster</i> —unless the bookish theoretic <sup>4</sup> , Wherein the <i>togèd consuls</i> can propose As masterly as he. Mere prattle without practice Is all his soldiership. But he, sir, had th' <i>election</i> , And I, of whom his eyes had seen the proof At Rhodes, at Cyprus, and on other grounds Christened and heathen, must belee <sup>5</sup> and calmed By debtor and creditor. This counter-caster <sup>6</sup> , He, in good time, must his <i>lieutenant</i> be, And I, God bless the mark, his <i>Moorship's ancient</i> . By heaven, I rather would have been his hangman.	<i>important men</i> <i>petition</i> <i>removed their hats to him (in respect)</i> <i>a lot of hot air</i> <i>military jargon</i> <i>rejects their petition; unquestionably/certainly</i> <i>a soldier who lacks practical army experience</i> <i>a foreigner not from Venice</i>
20		Why, there's no <i>remedy</i> . 'Tis the curse of service. <i>Preferment</i> goes by <i>letter and affection</i> , And not by old <i>gradation</i> , where each second Stood heir to the first. Now, sir, be judge yourself Whether I in any just term am <i>affined</i> To love the Moor.	<i>strategy</i> <i>a person who spins wool; a woman</i> <i>the Venetian councillors who wore togas...</i> <i>...(i.e. official dress)</i> <i>was selected</i>
25		I would not follow him, then.	
30	IAGO	O, sir, <i>content</i> you. I follow him to <i>serve my turn upon him</i> .	<i>second in command</i> <i>a sneering referee to Othello's colour; ...</i> <i>...standard bearer (third in command)</i> <i>solution</i> <i>promotion; personal recommendation...</i> <i>...and influence; by seniority</i> <i>obliged, bound</i>
35	RODERIGO		<i>don't you worry</i> <i>to use him for my own advantage</i>
40			

<sup>1</sup> The elopement of Othello and Desdemona.<sup>2</sup> Bombast was a cotton stuffing for quilts.<sup>3</sup> Cassio is a 'lady's man' who will probably be entangled in a disastrous marriage.<sup>4</sup> His knowledge of military matters is purely theoretical.<sup>5</sup> A naval image referring to one ship taking the wind out of another's sails, stranding the other ship.<sup>6</sup> By a 'number cruncher', a petty accountant who uses counters to do his calculations in an out-dated way.

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<sup>9</sup> She was taken to Othello by a gondolier, notorious go-betweens in love affairs.

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<sup>12</sup> Brabantio believes he is respected enough to receive help from the owners of the houses along the way if he asks.

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**COMPLETE - UNIQUE COMBINATION TEXTBOOK AND WORKBOOK ENSURES STUDENTS ALWAYS HAVE WHAT THEY NEED**

**INSPIRING - SYLLABUS IS BROUGHT TO LIFE AND PRESENTED IN A FRESH, INTERESTING WAY**



## **FIND OUT MORE**

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