

# THE ART OF CUTTING A SHAKESPEAREAN SCENE

## Practical and Easy Tips for Editing Shakespearean Text

- Grade:** This resource is designed for the instructor who are cutting a Shakespearean scene for the grade of their choice.
- Goal(s):** To explore the principles and techniques that go into cutting a Shakespearean scene
- Materials:** None

### DESCRIPTION:

The process of editing a scene from a play by Shakespeare is easier than you think! This resource provides practical and easy to follow tips for the process of editing a Shakespearean text – a process known as ‘cutting’.

### WHY CUTS?

For our purposes, we are defining “cutting” as the process of editing a text to make it shorter, clearer and more concise for student performance.

Directors and performers have been cutting Shakespeare’s plays for nearly 400 hundred years. When Shakespeare was alive, certain lines from his play Richard II offended Queen Elizabeth I and were outlawed (cut from being performed) during her lifetime. Hamlet is a four-hour production if not cut. Intentional and thoughtful cutting of Shakespeare’s plays are a part of the contemporary process of producing Shakespeare’s plays.

Cutting is not the same as abridging or adapting. Abridging can mean edits to the text at the expense of the language’s poetry. Abridging can also yield a disregard for the way Shakespeare often incorporates character development through spoken dialogue. Adapting most often implies re-writing Shakespeare using contemporary language.

This resource honors Shakespeare’s language which, when cut to support the work of students, maintains the language and poetry of the Bard. This is important because students benefit far more from encountering, speaking, and enacting words that William Shakespeare wrote than they do from cut-and-gut contemporary scripts that replace his mastery of language with pedestrian and often condescendingly simple language.

It may sound odd that the words and poetic structure of the theatre of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries are more accessible and powerful to perform than a 21<sup>st</sup> century ‘translation’ but it is true and this resource is designed to honor both Shakespeare and your work with students as you move from them from page to stage.



## SHAKESPEARE'S LANGUAGE

Shakespeare uses three different forms of poetry in his plays: rhymed verse, blank verse and prose.

1. **RHYMED VERSE** in Shakespeare's plays is most often found in rhymed couplets. A couplet is two lines that rhyme and have the same meter, or rhythm. Together, the two lines make one thought. Here is an example:

O time! Thou must untangle this, not I;  
It is too hard a knot for me to untie!

When cutting rhymed verse, always cut both lines of the couplet. This will assure that the full thought is cut from the text.

2. **BLANK VERSE** refers to unrhymed iambic pentameter. Iambic pentameter is the name given to the rhythm that Shakespeare uses in his plays. The rhythm of iambic pentameter is like a heartbeat repeated five times: 1: one unstressed (soft) beat | one stressed (strong) beat | 2: one unstressed (soft) beat | one stressed (strong) beat | 3: one unstressed (soft) beat | one stressed (strong) beat | 4: one unstressed (soft) beat | one stressed (strong) beat | 5: one unstressed (soft) beat | one stressed (strong) beat

Here is an example of one line of iambic pentameter. You will notice that the line starts with an unstressed word, with the second word being stressed (in bold). This pattern continues until the end of the line:

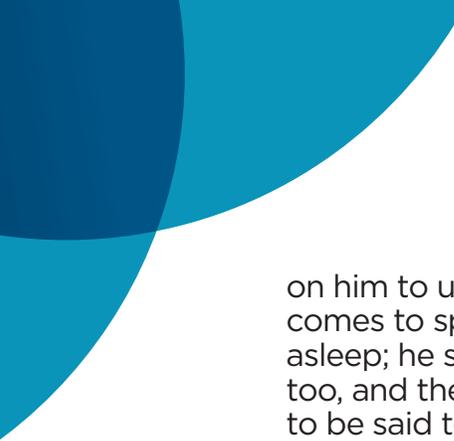
I left no ring with her: what means this lady?

Iambic pentameter is a very useful tool for speakers of Shakespeare's language because it helps to vary and color the words. Shakespeare not only intended this for speaking his words, he mastered it.

Before providing insight in how to cut blank verse, let's look at the third type of text Shakespeare often uses: prose.

3. **PROSE** refers to text that does not have to adhere to a prescribed poetic structure or rhythm. Prose in Shakespeare's text does not have the unstressed-stressed patterning of iambic pentameter. Prose can be thought of as ordinary speech, formatted in ways that you may be familiar with from contemporary plays. Here is an example from *Twelfth Night* (Act 1, Scene 5):

Madam, yond young fellow swears he will  
speak with you. I told him you were sick; he takes



on him to understand so much, and therefore comes to speak with you. I told him you were asleep; he seems to have a foreknowledge of that too, and therefore comes to speak with you. What is to be said to him, lady? He's fortified against any denial.

If you are unsure if a passage is in prose, look for the following visual clue: a long passage of prose is typically formatted to look like an ordinary paragraph with right and left justification. Prose extends from the left to the right margin with no line breaks in the middle of a sentence. Prose does not look like verse with line breaks and capitalization at the beginning of each line.

Prose is the easiest type of text to cut. When you cut Shakespeare's prose, do so by following (and maintaining) the character's line of thought.

## THE PROCESS OF CUTTING

### CUTTING CONSIDERATION # 1: Be Ruthless!

Once you have decided on a scene that you want to cut:

1. Make a copy of the scene that you can write on.  
Having an annotated version of the play (such as those published by Arden, Yale, Riverside or No Fear Shakespeare) can be helpful with archaic words, images and references.
2. Read the scene aloud. This is important because Shakespeare is meant to be spoken. Hearing the text aloud with an ear for what to keep and what to cut will help your editing. Be aware of words or phrases that you struggled to pronounce as they may prove likewise for your students. In this reading, do not worry about word definitions of words that you may be unfamiliar with – see
3. Highlight any funny, famous or lines of text that you know you will want to keep.
4. Now do a second reading aloud. In this reading, listen for the main story. Is it clear where the beginning, middle and end is within the scene?
  - a. Cut anything that is not part of the main story that you are choosing to tell.
  - b. Concurrently, use a trick that directors use all the time by making notations on the page as to where you could have your students standing, entering, and exiting.

### CUTTING CONSIDERATION # 2: Cut Subplots

Because your students are not performing the entire play, cutting any subplots mentioned in the scene can save your students and their audience from confusion.

- a. A subplot, for our purposes, is any event or conversation about an event that is not part of the cutting or the staging of the scene that you are performing.

### **CUTTING CONSIDERATION #3:** Cut Speeches

Unless you wish to provide a student with a challenge, there is no reason you have to burden one student with an entire speech or soliloquy. You can divide a speech or soliloquy among your students or you can edit the speech. Shakespeare will often structure his speeches and soliloquies by presenting the focus of the speech within the first few lines and summing up the outcome within the last few lines. It is often surprising how succinctly you can edit the middle and still retain the intention of the speech or soliloquy. Example from Twelfth Night Act 2, Scene 2:

Viola: I left no ring with her: what means this lady?  
Fortune forbid my outside have not charm'd her!  
~~She made good view of me; indeed, so much,  
That sure methought her eyes had lost her tongue,  
For she did speak in starts distractedly.  
She loves me, sure; the cunning of her passion  
Invites me in this churlish messenger.  
None of my lord's ring! why, he sent her none.  
I am the man: if it be so, as 'tis,  
Poor lady, she were better love a dream.  
Disguise, I see, thou art a wickedness,  
Wherein the pregnant enemy does much.  
How easy is it for the proper false  
In women's waxen hearts to set their forms!  
Alas, our frailty is the cause, not we!  
For such as we are made of, such we be.  
How will this fadge? my master loves her dearly;  
And I, poor monster, fond as much on him;  
And she, mistaken, seems to dote on me.  
What will become of this? As I am man,  
My state is desperate for my master's love;  
As I am woman,--now alas the day!--  
What thriftless sighs shall poor Olivia breathe!  
O time! thou must untangle this, not I;  
It is too hard a knot for me to untie!~~

### **CUTTING CONSIDERATION #4:** Cutting Blank Verse

When cutting blank verse (or iambic pentameter - iambic pentameter is the name given to the rhythm that Shakespeare uses in his plays: unstressed/stressed) work as much as possible to maintain the rhythm. If you are familiar with iambic pentameter, you could focus on cutting by syllable but for student performance, cutting to assure the rhythm of, and thought within, Shakespeare's speech is more important than worrying about fidelity to poetic structure.

Open the PDF, "A cutting from Julius Caesar" to find examples of the above cutting tips in action. This PDF is found on the main E-Shakespeare page under CUTTING A SCENE.