

Here are some examples of the forms Shakespeare uses in his plays. You should be able to find examples of all, or almost all, of these forms and techniques in whatever Shakespeare play you are studying. The same techniques are used throughout literature, so look out for examples in the other texts you are studying, too.

Prose

The usual form for most everyday written texts today, e.g. newspapers, novels. Shakespeare's use of prose often signals comic subject matter, a low status character speaking.

In *The Tempest*, Trinculo doesn't at first see Caliban hiding from him:

Trinculo: Here's neither bush nor shrub, to bear off any weather at all, and another storm brewing, I hear it sing i'th wind: ...What have we here, a man, or a fish?
(Act 2 Scene 2, *The Tempest*)

In *The Taming of the Shrew*, Sly gives a comic description of himself:

Sly: I am Christopher Sly - call not me 'honour' or 'lordship'. I ne'er drank sack in my life, and if you give me any conserves, give me conserves of beef. ...
(Induction Scene 2, *The Taming of the Shrew*)

Sometimes, prose allows a character to give criticism to one of a higher status, e.g. in *King Lear*, the Fool is able to say to Lear:

'I marvel what kin thou and thy daughters are ... I would not be thee, nuncle.'
(Act 1 Scene 4, *King Lear*)

Prose can also show characters being made fun of by a higher status character, as when Hamlet speaks to the First Clown in the grave digging scene:

First Clown: One that was a woman, sir. But, rest her soul, she's dead.
Hamlet: How absolute the knave is! We must speak by the card, or equivocation will undo us. ...
(Act 5 Scene 1, *Hamlet*)

Blank verse

Unrhymed lines with a regular rhythm and length, often used to reflect the rhythms of natural speech. Shakespeare's use of blank verse often signifies a high status character and serious subject matter:

Prospero: If I have too austerely punish'd you,
Your compensation makes amends, for I
Have given you here a third of mine own life.
(Act 4 Scene 1, *The Tempest*)

Sometimes Shakespeare uses a **shared line** between characters, as when Othello asks Iago if Cassio is 'honest', creating a quick exchange to reflect Othello's growing suspicion:

Iago: My lord, for aught I know.
Othello: What dost thou think?
(Act 3 Scene 3, *Othello*)

Shakespeare's blank verse mostly consists of **iambic pentameter** (five feet per line, each containing a weak-*strong* pair of syllables) as in:

Katharina: Fie, *fie*, unknit that *threatening unkind brow*,
And *dart not scornful glances from those eyes*
(Act 5 Scene 2, *The Taming of the Shrew*)

Language of magic

Shakespeare often uses the change in rhythm to seven syllable lines (a shortened form of tetrameter, four-foot lines) to present magic, spells etc, especially in *The Tempest* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*:

Ariel: If of life you keep a care,
Shake off slumber and beware;
(Near the end of Act 2 Scene 1, *The Tempest*)

Often there is a **trochaic** rhythm, which consists of alternate *strong-weak* syllables:

Oberon: *What thou seest when thou dost wake*,
Do it for thy true love take;
(Act 2 Scene 2, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*)

Rhyming couplets

A set of two adjacent rhyming lines that Shakespeare often uses to signal the end of a scene or section, often to create tension:

Duke: Is more to bread than stone. Hence shall we see,
If power change purpose, what our seemers be.
(Act 1 Scene 3, *Measure for Measure*)

He also uses these to create a sense of unreality or artificiality in the speech, such as when in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* Demetrius reacts to first seeing Helena, after she has fallen under the spell of 'love in idleness'. The audience knows the plant to be the cause of her behaviour, but Demetrius doesn't, creating **dramatic irony**:

Demetrius (wakes): O Helena, goddess, nymph, perfect, divine!
To what, my love, shall I compare thine eyne?
Crystal is muddy, O, how ripe in show
Thy lips, those kissing cherries, tempting grow!
(Act 3 Scene 2, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*)

Quatrain

A group of four lines with an abab rhyme scheme. Shakespeare may use this to highlight what is being said, to profess love as in sonnet forms, or express emotion when sung in a ballad form, as in *Twelfth Night*, when the Clown sings in quatrains to emphasise Orsino's self-indulgent lovesickness for Olivia:

Clown [sings]: Come away, come away death,
And in sad cypress let me be laid;
Fly away, fly away breath,
I am slain by a fair cruel maid;
(Act 2 Scene 4, *Twelfth Night*)