Daily Bard

TOOLKIT

The close reading toolkit

Five passes over any passage, from what it says to how it works. With the terms examiners expect, sentence stems for writing it up, and a passage to practise on.

USE IT FOR	WORKS WITH	TIME
Unseen extracts, annotation, exam practice	Any speech, scene or sonnet	15 minutes per passage

Five passes over a passage

Close reading is slow reading with a pencil. Do not hunt for devices first. Work through these five passes in order, and the devices will turn up attached to a meaning.

1. Sense: what is being said?

Read to the punctuation, not to the end of the line. Put the passage into plain modern English, sentence by sentence. If one phrase resists, mark it and move on. You cannot analyse what you have not understood.

2. Situation: who is speaking, to whom, and why now?

Is the speaker alone (a soliloquy), overheard, or performing for someone? What has just happened? What does the audience know that the characters do not? This is where dramatic irony lives.

3. Words and images

Circle the words doing the most work. Look for patterns: groups of images (light and dark, disease, animals, money), repeated words, opposites set against each other. Ask what each choice suggests that a plainer word would not.

4. Sound and metre

Read it aloud. Most of Shakespeare's verse is blank verse: unrhymed iambic pentameter, ten syllables that tend to alternate unstressed and stressed. The interest is in where the pattern is kept and where it breaks.

- **Regular:** "But soft, what light through yonder window breaks?" Five even beats. Romeo's wonder is steady.
- **Stress pulled to the front:** "Now is the winter of our discontent" opens on a stressed "Now". The speaker seizes the line.
- **An extra syllable:** "To be or not to be, that is the question" has eleven syllables and ends on an unstressed one (a feminine ending). The line does not quite settle.
- **Run-on lines:** "We are such stuff / As dreams are made on" spills over the line end (enjambment), so the thought will not stay inside the frame.

Notice too when a character moves between verse and prose, when a rhyming couplet closes a scene, and when two speakers share one line of verse.

5. Shape: where does it turn?

Find the turn. Speeches change direction: on a “but” or a “yet”, at a question, after a full stop in the middle of a line (a caesura). Sonnets usually turn at line nine or at the couplet. Describe the journey from the first line to the last.

THE STEP MOST STUDENTS SKIP

After every observation, ask “so what?” A device is evidence only when you say what it does: to a character, to a theme, to the audience’s sympathy.

Terms worth knowing, with examples

TERM	WHAT IT IS	EXAMPLE
Antithesis	Opposites balanced against each other	“Fair is foul, and foul is fair” (Macbeth)
Oxymoron	Opposites fused in one phrase	“Parting is such sweet sorrow” (Romeo and Juliet)
Metaphor	One thing spoken of as another	“Juliet is the sun” (Romeo and Juliet)
Personification	An idea given a living form	“the green-eyed monster” (Othello)
Apostrophe	Addressing something that cannot answer	“Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks!” (King Lear)
Repetition	A word or phrase insisted on	“Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow” (Macbeth)
Caesura	A strong pause inside a line	“To die, to sleep” (Hamlet)
Soliloquy	A character alone, thinking aloud	Hamlet in Act 3, Scene 1
Aside	A remark other characters do not hear	Macbeth in Act 1, Scene 3
Dramatic irony	The audience knows more than a character	Duncan praising Macbeth’s castle

Sentence stems for writing it up

- The verb "…" suggests …, which presents [character] as …
- Shakespeare sets "…" against "…", so that …
- The line breaks its rhythm at "…", and the stumble enacts …
- Because the audience already knows …, the line also means …
- By the end of the speech the tone has moved from … to …
- An audience in Shakespeare's theatre might have …; a modern one may …

Practice passage

Macbeth is alone, on his way to murder King Duncan.

> Is this a dagger which I see before me,
> The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee.
> I have thee not, and yet I see thee still.
> Art thou not, fatal vision, sensible
> To feeling as to sight? Or art thou but
> A dagger of the mind, a false creation
> Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain?
>
> MACBETH · ACT 2, SCENE 1 · 2.1.44-51

1. Put the passage into plain modern English.
2. Macbeth is alone. What does the soliloquy let the audience see that other characters cannot?
3. Count the questions. What do they suggest about his state of mind?
4. He speaks to the dagger as "thee" and "thou". What is the effect of addressing it directly?
5. Read line three aloud. How do its short, plain words and its balance around "and yet" fit what he is describing?
6. What does "heat-oppressed brain" suggest about where the vision comes from? Why does that matter for the question of Macbeth's guilt?

Write it up: one paragraph answering "How does Shakespeare present Macbeth's state of mind before the murder?" Use two short quotations and one comment on sound or rhythm.

Where to go next

See the method at work in the close readings of **To be, or not to be**, **Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow** and **Sonnet 18**. Then turn your notes into an argument with the **essay planner**, and check unfamiliar words against the **language cheat sheet**. The **Macbeth study guide** places the practice passage in the whole play.

Close reading improves with small, regular practice. **Daily Bard** gives you one short passage each morning: read the lines, decide what you think they mean, then turn the leaf and compare your reading with the plain-English one.



A page of Shakespeare, every day.

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