

DIGITAL THEATRE+

VIRTUAL LEARNING LESSON PLAN
DRAMA/THEATRE

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HAMLET

BY WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

LESSON PLAN LENGTH: 60 MINUTES

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

By the end of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Demonstrate an understanding of the dynamic between key characters and articulate informed, personal and creative responses to the interplay between them
- Write fluently about the central relationship dynamic

To teach this lesson, you will need the following resources found in your toolkit:

- [Hamlet Study Guide](#)
- [Hamlet Practical Workshop Guide](#)
- [Hamlet | Royal Shakespeare Company](#)

Plus:

- For the entire lesson – a video conference link for your chosen platform*; an email explaining what they need to do before the video call (see Exercises 2 and 3)
- For Exercise 1 – students should have a hat to hand
- For Exercise 2 – prepare an email with instructions for students
- For Exercise 3 – a shared Google Doc* for students to write their responses on the play's most famous speech

**Keeping students and teachers safe during remote education is essential. Please ensure any online platform you are using to communicate or coordinate with students is suitable for their age group and check privacy settings. For further information, see the [NSPCC guidance](#).*

EXERCISE 1

WHAT IS THIS A PLAY ABOUT? TALKING, SHARING, INFORMATION GATHERING



ESTIMATED TIME:
15 MINUTES

The aim of this exercise is to immerse the students in the personal, political and family dynamics that are at the heart of the play, and encourage them to begin to form their own personal opinions of and responses to the themes within the text.

- Before meeting online, send all of your students a copy of the character biographies for Gertrude, Claudius and Old Hamlet which can be found in our Hamlet Study Guide in the section on **Characters**. They should read these before the lesson starts, and also come prepared with a hat of any kind.
- Hold a video conference on your chosen platform. Assign consecutive numbers to each person in the group.
- Going in numerical order, invite each student to say what they think, feel, and know about the play in response to the question, '**Hamlet is...**?' During this exercise, encourage your students to think about locations, characters, and political and personal dynamics.
- Following on from this, re-start the exercise and ask them the same question, 'Hamlet is...?' However, this time focus only on the character of Hamlet.
- Finally, tell students that you will say the name of one of the other characters. Their challenge is to recall a fact about this character based on the reading they did before the lesson. Tell them to put on their hat as soon as they've remembered something. The first three hat-wearers should be called upon to share what they remember.

EXERCISE 2

MEET THE CHARACTERS

Before meeting online on your chosen video platform, instruct your students to find images from film or TV which represent the following character types:

- A grieving student whose father has just died
 - A newly crowned king
 - A ghost
 - A glamorous mother/queen
- During your online session, students will share their images with the group, justifying their image choices. If possible, have the images sent to you so you can create a gallery of images for character inspiration.
 - After each student has shared their images, discuss the following:
 - What did you notice about the images shared?
 - What kind of place is Elsinore?
 - What kind of world is this play set in?
 - After this discussion, instruct them to choose a character from the list above and tell them they will be writing two diary entries:
 - **Before** the death of King Hamlet – what is life like, how are you feeling, what is going on?
 - **After** the death of King Hamlet – including the perception of life at court versus the reality of how life really is.
 - As an alternative, students could write a monologue which includes all the information from their diary entries. Students could memorise and perform their monologues as an extra performance task.



ESTIMATED TIME:
15 MINUTES

The aim of this exercise is to dive deeper into the dynamic between key characters and begin to place this within the context of the world of the play. This exercise also encourages the students to understand the differing points of view of the central characters and begin to empathise with their situations. This task continues to build a foundation of knowledge and understanding which can then be articulated with increasing confidence. This exercise can be repeated later by using quotations from the text to justify their decisions, moving students from a storytelling response to analysis and in-depth knowledge of the text.

EXERCISE 3

LANGUAGE AND CHARACTER (PART 1) “TO BE, OR NOT TO BE”: WATCHING AND ANALYSING

- Before your video call, ask students to watch (out of context) *Hamlet* in action. They should bring up the production of the play and select **Act 3, Scene 1** (0:13:05) in the key scenes section. Tell them to watch it all but repeat the section of Hamlet’s “To be, or not to be” soliloquy.
- After viewing, students should write down words to express Hamlet’s state of mind. Create a shared Google Doc for them to do this.
- On your class video call, discuss why this speech is so famous: What are the key issues or ideas that are being explored here? There are so many interpretations of the soliloquy – perhaps the most famous speech in theatre history: Why do students think this might be the case?
- Instead of discussing this on a video call, your students could respond to these questions in writing.



ESTIMATED TIME:
15 MINUTES

The aim of this exercise is for the students to see a visual version of the text and then speak a small but vital moment of that aloud, experiencing the impact that language has on meaning.

This will trigger important discussions about artistic and interpretive decisions.

EXERCISE 4

LANGUAGE AND CHARACTER (PART 2) “TO BE, OR NOT TO BE”: LISTENING AND RESPONDING



ESTIMATED TIME:
15 MINUTES

The aim of this exercise is to encourage discussion, personal and creative responses, and to deepen understanding of the importance of interpersonal dynamics between characters and how this influences the structural narrative.

- Make sure that students have access to Hamlet’s “To be, or not to be” soliloquy (found in the [Hamlet Practical Workshop Guide](#)).
- Invite a few students to be Hamlet.
- Assign students a number and ask them to read the soliloquy in numerical order – each student reading from one punctuation mark to the next – with chosen Hamlets listening and not speaking (it’s beneficial if they close their eyes).
- At the end of the speech, immediately ask the listeners to answer the following questions: ‘How do you feel about your dad’s death? How do you feel about your mum’s marriage to your uncle? What do you want to do now?’
- Finally, repeat the '*Hamlet is...?*' activity from Exercise 1. Discuss whether (and how) students responses have changed throughout the course of the lesson.
- Ask students to write up notes under the title ‘Character and Context’. This could be done in the form of full paragraphs, a table or a mind map, depending on your students’ preferred methods of working.

Extension activity:

- Encourage students to create a revision booklet using the information they have gathered.

For further resources to help you teach *Hamlet*, including a [full-length production](#), and [Practical Workshop Guide](#), visit www.digitaltheatreplus.com

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QUESTIONS

1. At the beginning of the play, where does Hamlet return from, and what does he discover?

2. When assuming an *antic disposition*, where does Hamlet tell Ophelia to go?

3. What is an Arras? And who is hiding behind one?

4. Whose boat gets attacked by pirates on the way to England?

5. Which character says, "Neither a borrower nor a lender be"?

6. Which friend of Hamlet tells him that he has seen the ghost of the former King?

7. What is the name of Ophelia's brother?

8. Who says, "O, woe is me, to have seen what I have seen, see what I see!"?

ANSWERS

1. At the beginning of the play, where does Hamlet return from and what does he discover?
Answer: He returns from university, discovering that his mother has married his dead father's brother.
2. When assuming an *antic disposition*, where does Hamlet tell Ophelia to go?
Answer: A nunnery
3. What is an Arras? And who is hiding behind one?
Answer: A curtain. Polonius.
4. Whose boat gets attacked by pirates on the way to England?
Answer: Hamlet's boat
5. Which character says, "Neither a borrower nor a lender be"?
Answer: Polonius
6. Which friend of Hamlet tells him that he has seen the ghost of the former King?
Answer: Horatio
7. What is the name of Ophelia's brother?
Answer: Laertes
8. Who says, "O, woe is me, to have seen what I have seen, see what I see!"?
Answer: Ophelia

The following questions have been crafted to deepen and expand your students' understanding of the text. They can be used for homework or to prompt classroom discussions.

Death and Mortality

- Whose death frames the personal and political nature of the play and why?
- Describe why certain deaths take on a civic aspect.
- “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark” is a symbolic statement. Why?
- What is Hamlet trying to convey when he addresses the skull of Yorick?

Indecision and Uncertainty

- Give two examples where Shakespeare fuels the play with uncertainty.
- Which prevalent philosopher of his time is Shakespeare giving voice to?
- How does Hamlet demonstrate his scepticism for his actual and emotional landscape?

Power and Politics

- Describe why the fact that the central family is a royal one makes all that happens political, as well as personal.
- Give an example of how Claudius considers the importance of popular opinion.
- Give an example of how Shakespeare positions his characters in relation to one another as well as to the wider world.