

DIGITAL THEATRE+

VIRTUAL LEARNING LESSON PLAN
ENGLISH



MACBETH

BY WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

LESSON PLAN LENGTH: 60 MINUTES

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

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

- Feel confident as they begin an early-stage analysis of the complex characters, situations and ideas/themes within the play
- Think critically about the story and discuss potential outcomes
- Immerse themselves in the world of the play by participating in a variety of practical exercises
- Use historical context, textual evidence, and imagination to conjure a visual image of the world and begin a character analysis

To teach this lesson, you will need the following resources:

- [Shakespeare In Your Space: Macbeth Practical Guide](#)
- [Shakespeare In Your Space: Macbeth Workshop](#)
- [Macbeth Study Guide](#)
- [Introduction to the Story](#)
- [Evidence Tags](#)
- [Act One – The witches](#)

Plus:

- A video conference link to your chosen platform*
- For Exercise 4 – access to a mobile phone/online messaging service, with students divided into four group chats before the video call begins; or a pre-prepared Google Doc.
- For Exercise 5 – a pre-prepared Google Doc
- For Exercise 8 – students will need their own paper and pen

(Tip: Press 'Share' to copy the link to your Doc and make sure to change the settings to 'Anyone with the link can edit'.)

****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

SHAKESPEARE CIRCLE

- Hold a video conference on your chosen platform. Assign consecutive numbers to each person in the group.
- Going in numerical order, ask each person to say any word or phrase that comes to mind when finishing the statement 'Shakespeare is...?' All responses should be encouraged.
- Repeat the previous exercise with the question '*Macbeth* is...?' and encourage the group to reveal the word or phrase they think of when they think about *Macbeth*. They can respond either about the play or the character.
- At the end of this sequence, based on everything they have just heard, have the students write down one word in the video chat feature to describe the play.
- Alternatively, you can ask students to complete this exercise alone, either before or instead of on a video conference call.



ESTIMATED TIME:
3 MINUTES

The aim of this exercise is to take away any feelings of anxiety or uncertainty about the play early on to encourage fuller participation, and get the students thinking and talking about the text.

EXERCISE 2

SETTING THE SCENE

- Send the following excerpt to your students before the start of the virtual lesson.
- Choose somebody to read the excerpt aloud – consider having them read it in the style of a voice-over for a movie trailer, really building the suspense and tension. You may also wish to use an appropriate music track to underscore the text, creating atmosphere and encouraging students to engage with the mood and content of the play.
- This excerpt is taken from the [Macbeth Study Guide](#) in the section **Introduction to the Story** ([a printable version is available](#)):

Scotland is under attack by Scottish rebels supported by Ireland and an invading force from Norway.

Two Scottish generals, Macbeth and Banquo, have successfully defeated the attacks, and after the battle, are met by three witches on a desolate moor. They claim to be able to predict the future and tell Macbeth that King Duncan of Scotland is going to reward him by giving him the title of Thane (a rank of Scottish nobility) of Cawdor. After that they predict he will become King of Scotland himself, and that Banquo's sons will also become Kings of Scotland.

The men don't believe these old hags until two messengers from the King arrive and tell Macbeth he is to be named Thane of Cawdor. But when they visit the King, he announces that his son, Malcolm, is next in line to the throne.

So how is Macbeth to become King?

- Lead a class discussion on potential answers to this question. The class may be familiar with what happens in the story – but is there anything else that could have happened? Potential questions could include:
 - Whose ambition drives the plot of *Macbeth*?
 - When do you think Macbeth first starts thinking of murder as a way of claiming his fate?
- You can mute everybody while you ask the questions. Then ask everybody who wants to respond to put a hand on their head, and unmute students as you choose them to take their turn.
- Instead of carrying out this activity as a live reading, you could ask students to record their own performances on their phones, or write directions for how they think it should be read.



**ESTIMATED TIME:
5 MINUTES**

The aim of this exercise is to set the scene and introduce students to the world of the play, providing them with the framework of the text they will be studying. It also gets them to think critically about key decisions made by the main character. This discussion assists students in articulating their ideas and responses orally, gaining confidence before having to put pen to paper. Later in the course of study, you could ask students to refer back to their original predictions and find textual evidence that would either support or contradict those ideas.

EXERCISE 3

INTRODUCING ATMOSPHERE: HAPPY COURT/SUSPICIOUS COURT



ESTIMATED TIME:
5 MINUTES

The aim of this exercise is to immerse the students in the world of the play, encouraging them to experience the atmosphere and tension, and opening them up to the impact of different physical actions and emotions. By immersing students physically in this world, they are better able to analyse the text once they begin reading it. Before this task, it would be beneficial for the students to understand the nature of court, and the way in which status and power are important in the play. This context would support students moving forward through the text enabling them to analyse character and meaning in more depth.

- Introduce students to the idea of etiquette and status:
 - How might one behave at court?
 - How do we communicate status and power through body language and eye contact?
- Establishing this first will enable students to differentiate between what they are doing in later parts of this task.
- Ask your students to imagine that they are now in the world of the happy court – there's not a care in the world, everyone is happy, everyone has a smile on their face and all is well. Have a brief discussion with students, reminding them to respond as a member of the happy court.
- After a few moments, ask them to reflect on how they feel, how they are speaking and what facial expressions they are using.
- Once they are fully committed to the world of the happy court, ask them to have brief conversations with each other, choosing two students at a time so that each person can be clearly heard on the call. You may wish to use prompts, guiding one student to ask another how they are or how their day has been so far.
- Then, ask students to talk about what they were feeling and discuss the atmosphere that was created.
- Now ask the group to imagine that they are no longer in this world, but in the suspicious court – the happy king has died and his successor is a cruel tyrant. In this world, you can't trust anybody. Suggest that at any moment they suspect someone might be out to kill them.
- Ask students how this makes them look at the other students on the call: What were they looking for in other students? What were they doing with their own faces?
- Point out that you can only tell so much from a person's face. What other physical giveaways might there be from people in the happy court and people in the suspicious court? Examples might include the way somebody walks, whether or not they're fidgeting, what they're doing with their hands etc.

EXERCISE 4

EVIDENCE TAG

- Divide your students into four small group chats and then give each group an **Evidence Tag**.
- Now ask the groups to message each other to consider the following question: 'If this (their Evidence Tag) exists in the world of our play, then what else could exist?'
- Encourage them to think about the physical environment, the people - their role in society and the feelings that they have, other objects that could be there and key events that could happen involving this object.
- Mute everybody on the call and allow the groups two minutes to brainstorm ideas via group chat.
- After that time, unmute everyone and ask each group to share their findings, stating 'My evidence was... and I saw...' Spend a few minutes sharing evidence.
- After all the groups have shared their evidence, invite individual students to construct an image of what happened in the space where all of this 'evidence' was found.
- Alternatively, you could add the four tags to separate pages on a Google Doc alongside the question 'If this exists in the world of our play, then what else could exist?'
- Share the link with your students and ask them to write their responses (not forgetting their name) for each piece of evidence. In a later discussion, or as an individual assignment, students could use the group's collective responses to write about what happened in the space where all of this 'evidence' was found.
- For students who are less confident at textual analysis, the metaphor of being a detective can be a very helpful 'way in' to thinking about what evidence we have in the language, structure and form of a play. Relating to examination style answers, we must provide evidence to the examiner for our statements, just as we would in a court of law.



ESTIMATED TIME:
10 MINUTES

The aim of this exercise is to unlock the imagination and collectively conjure a world which offers students a framework that supports their exploration of the play. In this task, we are thinking as detectives and discovering how story details can empower your group, enabling them to feel like they are taking ownership of the play.

EXERCISE 5

INTRODUCING LANGUAGE: THE WITCHES (PART 1)



ESTIMATED TIME:
5 MINUTES

The aim of this exercise is to introduce students to the first characters we meet in the play, getting them to think about who they are and what they represent. With this task and Exercise 6, students will begin to consider their interpretation of themes and characters in a play text.

- Prepare a Google Doc with **witches, weird sisters, and hags** written at the top of the page. List students' names so that they each have an allocated space to write their responses.
- While still on your video call, share the link to the Google Doc and give students two minutes to write other things that come to mind in response to these words.
- Once they have finished, ask students to read what everybody else has written.
- Now repeat the '*Macbeth* is...?' exercise but using the phrase 'The witches are...?'
- After doing the exercises above, get students to think of a single word to describe the witches and add it to the video chat feature or Google Doc.
- Alternatively, if not on a video call, give students a time limit and ask them to write their responses on the Google Doc. Then, have them read everybody else's responses.

EXERCISE 6

WITCHCRAFT AND SUPERSTITION

- Go to the [Macbeth Study Guide](#) and read the section on Context – **Witchcraft and Superstition**.
- Discuss the questions posed at the end of the passage.
 - With all this in mind, are the witches still relevant figures to us today?
 - How would a modern adaptation treat them?
 - Is it possible to see them as victimised women?
 - Or can they still hold the power to mystify and terrify their audience in equal measure?
- Alternatively, ask students to write or present a response to a single question and then share their responses with the rest of the group.



ESTIMATED TIME:
5 MINUTES

The aim of this exercise is to provide students with the context of why the witches are so important to the story. Students will begin to connect to the characters and discover their relevance as well as their universality and who they would be in today's society. Combined with the previous tasks, students are now learning the contextual knowledge that will unlock much of the *Macbeth* world.

EXERCISE 7

INTRODUCING LANGUAGE: THE WITCHES (PART 2)



ESTIMATED TIME:
5 MINUTES

The aim of this exercise is to begin an in-depth analysis of the text, starting with a manageable and familiar section of the play. Students can now begin to create their own interpretations of the witches. As well as having a greater understanding of the textual content, students will be more confident when watching the various film versions of *Macbeth* that are available, understanding that different interpretations offer alternative meanings and contemporary contexts.

Reading Circle:

- Using the first section of the witches' speech from the play – “**when shall we three meet again**” – have your students read the text aloud in unison on a video call.
- Then, assign each student a number. Have them read the speech again, one at a time, line by line, so that Student 1 reads Line 1 and so on.
- Read it a third time, line-by-line, experimenting with different ways of saying each line – hysterically, scarily, strangely, quietly, etc.
- To do this, have Student 2 assign the way of speaking to Student 1, Student 3 to Student 2, etc.
- To change this exercise to a written assignment, ask students to imagine the speech being delivered in different ways (e.g. humorously, scarily, etc.). Then, ask them to write about how this might affect the meaning of the speech and an audience's reaction to it.

Reading and Moving:

- Invite the group to walk around the room they are in, speaking the scene out loud by themselves and using all they have learned from the Reading Circle. If you're doing this while on a video call, mute everybody first so that they don't disturb each other.
- Now get them to give one-word responses to the witches on the video chat feature.
- In their own time, encourage students to think about how (if at all) their experience of the speech was different when performing it out loud compared to reading it on the page. Did performing it aloud give them a new perspective or help them to discover something new about the text?

EXERCISE 8

CLOSE TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

- Ask students to write three words on a piece of paper to describe how Act 1, Scene 1 makes them feel.
- Ask students 'Do you think Shakespeare wanted you to feel like this?'
- Then, ask them to write three words to describe how they think Shakespeare wanted his audience to feel when they saw this scene.
- Once students have decided how they think Shakespeare wanted them to feel, ask them to re-read the scene to themselves and see if they can discover the devices Shakespeare used to try to make them feel this way. Ask students to highlight anything in the text which they believe he has used to evoke these feelings in his audience.
- Once students have finished writing, ask them:
 - Why do you think he starts the scene with a question?
 - Does he want you to be curious?
 - Why does he choose to have the witches meet in thunder, lightning or rain rather than night, fog or hurricane?
- Every single line tells you something about the witches and is designed to make you feel a whole range of things about them. Ask students to try writing an emotion after every line in **Act 1, Scene 1** to explore how Shakespeare's words can manipulate the audience's emotions.



ESTIMATED TIME:
10 MINUTES

The aim of this exercise is to do a deep dive into the text being studied. Students will be using these techniques as they continue their study of the play.

Additional activity or homework:

Watch the first two chapters of the interview [On Directing: Gemma Bodinetz](#) where she answers the following questions:

- What do you think *Macbeth* is about?
- What do you think Shakespeare was trying to write about?

After viewing these two sections, have your students respond to the following:

Share your thoughts on what Gemma Bodinetz says in response to these questions. Do you agree or disagree? Support your opinion with specific details and references to the text/production.

For further resources to help you teach *Macbeth*, including our **full-length production**, and **Study Guide**, visit **www.digitaltheatreplus.com**

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INTRODUCTION TO THE STORY

Scotland is under attack by Scottish rebels supported by Ireland and an invading force from Norway.

Two Scottish generals, Macbeth and Banquo, have successfully defeated the attackers, and after the battle are met by three witches on a desolate moor. They claim to be able to predict the future and tell Macbeth that King Duncan of Scotland is going to reward him by giving him the title of Thane (a rank of Scottish nobility) of Cawdor. After that they predict he will become King of Scotland himself, and that Banquo's sons will also become Kings of Scotland.

The men don't believe these old hags until two messengers from the king arrive and tell Macbeth he is to be named Thane of Cawdor. But when they visit the king, he announces that his son, Malcolm, is next in line to the throne.

So how is Macbeth to become king?



A CROWN



TWO BLOODY DAGGERS



A STORMY HEATH



MIDNIGHT

MACBETH WITCHES – ACT ONE

ACT ONE SCENE ONE

[Thunder and lightning. Enter three WITCHES]

FIRST WITCH:

When shall we three meet again
In thunder, lightning, or in rain?

SECOND WITCH:

When the hurlyburly's done,
When the battle's lost and won.

THIRD WITCH:

That will be ere the set of sun.

FIRST WITCH:

Where the place?

SECOND WITCH:

Upon the heath.

THIRD WITCH:

There to meet with Macbeth.

FIRST WITCH:

I come, Graymalkin!

SECOND WITCH:

Paddock calls.

THIRD WITCH:

Anon.

ALL:

Fair is foul, and foul is fair:
Hover through the fog and filthy air.

[Exeunt]

QUESTIONS

1. Who are Duncan's two sons?

2. What is the witches' prophecy for Banquo?

3. Who says "He was a gentleman on whom I built an absolute trust"?

4. Who discovers Duncan's body?

5. Where do Duncan's sons flee to after his murder?

6. Who appears at the feast Macbeth holds for the Scottish nobles?

7. Whose family does Macbeth have murdered?

8. What happens to Lady Macbeth?

9. How does Birnam Wood come to Dunsinane Hill?

10. The witches tell Macbeth he cannot be killed by anyone “of woman born”. So, how is he defeated and by whom?

ANSWERS

1. Who are Duncan's two sons?

Answer: Malcolm and Donalbain

2. What is the witches' prophecy for Banquo?

Answer: Banquo's heirs will be king

3. Who says "He was a gentleman on whom I built an absolute trust"?

Answer: Duncan

4. Who discovers Duncan's body?

Answer: Macduff

5. Where do Duncan's sons flee to after his murder?

Answer: Malcolm goes to England and Donalbain goes to Ireland

6. Who appears at the feast Macbeth holds for the Scottish nobles?

Answer: Banquo's ghost

7. Whose family does Macbeth have murdered?

Answer: The Macduffs

8. What happens to Lady Macbeth?

Answer: Haunted and consumed with guilt over all that she and Macbeth have done, she goes mad and finally kills herself.

9. How does Birnam Wood come to Dunsinane Hill?

Answer: Each soldier cuts down a branch/bough from trees in the wood and holds it in front of them in order to disguise their numbers as they march towards Dunsinane Hill. From afar, it appears the woods are moving closer.

10. The witches tell Macbeth he cannot be killed by anyone "of woman born". So, how is he defeated and by whom?

Answer: He is killed by Macduff, who had a caesarean birth.

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.

CHARACTERS

- Why does Malcolm flee so suddenly after the death of his father, and is this the right decision, considering he is the rightful heir?
- Who holds more power in the relationship: Macbeth or his wife?
- Does Banquo's ghost really appear, or is he simply a figment of Macbeth's imagination?
- Are the witches simply evil, playing on man's weaknesses, such as Macbeth's ambition, or are they vehicles of fate?

CONTEXT

- Why are children so crucial to the action of Macbeth? How is their innocence set against the corruption of Scotland by Macbeth?
- Why was Shakespeare writing about what makes a good or bad king so soon after James I's coronation?

MAKING CONNECTIONS

- For much of the play, Malcolm is a king in exile. What must it be like to be exiled from the country you believe you have a right to rule? Can you find any other examples in history or fiction of a similar scenario?
- Do some research into one or more of the following states and see if you can find out what happened to freedom of speech: Nazi Germany, Stalin's Russia, the Stasi-led East Germany during the Cold War, or today's North Korea, Belarus or Burma.
 - How did these regimes control language or people's freedom to meet and talk openly?
 - How accurate do you think Shakespeare was in his depiction of living in a totalitarian state?
- "It will have blood; they say, blood will have blood" (Act Three, Scene Four). This profound realisation from Macbeth comes at the end of the banquet scene, just after the guests (and Banquo's ghost) have left. It is a moment of sobering clarity in the troubled mind of Macbeth, where he understands the act of killing will only lead to more and more bloodletting, either in retribution against him or because he will be forced to kill everyone he sees as a threat to his security. It is a startling image and one that resonates through the play and through the modern world.

Can you think of any examples from the world today, the media or art, where a similar idea is articulated? Potential examples:

- A media report on violence.
- The cycle of sectarian violence and retaliation that dominated Ireland in the second half of the 20th century.
- The situations in Iraq and Afghanistan after the recent wars.
- The genre of gangster films, where an act of violence often leads to many more, such as *The Godfather* or *Goodfellas*.
- TV shows such as *The Wire*, *The Sopranos* or *Breaking Bad*.
- Shakespeare often depicts brilliant generals who flounder in a domestic setting - think about Othello and Mark Antony for example. Can you find any contemporary references to soldiers returning from war who have struggled to settle or find a role for themselves in a domestic setting?