

## Top tips for learning a Shakespearean speech off by heart

Created by Shakespeare Schools Festival

This information has been divided into three sections:

- Understanding the speech
- Learning the lines
- Preparing for the performance

### Part 1 Understanding the speech

To perform a speech well, you need to become comfortable with the words so that you can eventually say them as if they were your own.

#### 1. Don't be scared of the language (however unfamiliar it is)

It can be useful initially to say the words without worrying about what the speech is about exactly or what each word means.

#### 2. Say it out loud

When learning the speech, say the words out loud, clearly and quite slowly. Enjoy saying the words out loud and experiencing the different feel of the words in the mouth: the hard, ugly sounds and the softer, more pleasant sounds. By saying these words, you will begin to experience what Shakespeare intended his actors and their audience to feel. Without even trying you will begin to get an idea of what is going on.

#### 3. Break it up

Break the speech down into manageable sections. Try walking as you say the speech out loud and turning 180 degrees on a full stop, question mark or exclamation mark. When you reach a comma, try a 90 degree turn. This will help you find the rhythm and the poetry in the speech and help you to breathe. This exercise can be useful to give you an insight into a character's state of mind. For example, lots of punctuation marks might indicate a number of different thoughts – a mind in turmoil, so to speak. Absence of punctuation marks might indicate more considered intent – someone with a purpose.

#### 4. Spot the patterns

Notice patterns in the words. The best way is to highlight words that:

- are opposites
- begin with the same letter
- are repetitions

MACBETH

[Aside] Cannot be ill, cannot be good: if ill,  
Why hath it given me earnest of success,  
Commencing in a truth? I am thane of Cawdor:  
If good, why do I yield to that suggestion  
Whose horrid image doth unfix my hair  
And make my seated heart knock at my ribs,  
Against the use of nature? Present fears  
Are less than horrible imaginings:  
My thought, whose murder yet is but fantastical,  
**S**hakes **s**o my **s**ingle **s**tate of man that function  
Is **s**mother'd in **s**urmise, and nothing is  
But what is not.



### 5. Investigate

If you don't know what a word means, look it up. Search online for Shakespeare websites that provide a translation in today's language. It's important to understand what every word means. However, remember that when you perform the speech it should sound as if this is the first time you have had these thoughts and spoken these words.

### 6. Picture it

Shakespeare uses images. What do the images tell you about the character whose speech you are learning? If you understand the images you are using and can "see it in your head", you will be much more effective at learning your speech and telling it to an audience.

Think about why your character would use the images in your speech. For example, in the first speech below, Macbeth personifies the stars in the night sky as accomplices to his evil plotting, and in the second speech, Lady Macbeth personifies her husband's hope of becoming king as a drunkard with a hang-over.

MACBETH

[Aside] The Prince of Cumberland! that is a step  
On which I must fall down, or else o'erleap,  
For in my way it lies. Stars, hide your fires;  
Let not light see my black and deep desires:  
The eye wink at the hand; yet let that be,  
Which the eye fears, when it is done, to see.

LADY MACBETH

Was the hope drunk  
Wherein you dress'd yourself? hath it slept since?  
And wakes it now, to look so green and pale  
At what it did so freely? From this time  
Such I account thy love. Art thou afeard  
To be the same in thine own act and valour  
As thou art in desire? Wouldst thou have that  
Which thou esteem'st the ornament of life,  
And live a coward in thine own esteem,  
Letting 'I dare not' wait upon 'I would,'  
Like the poor cat i' the adage?





## Part 2 Learning the lines

We all learn differently. These are some suggestions that you may find helpful. The more you practise, the easier it will become.

### 1. Visualise your speech

If you have a photographic memory, you might benefit from writing the speech out in different colours. Get a friend to check it. You don't want to start learning something with a line missing or an incorrect word.

### 2. Make a visual story

A good way to remember the order of your lines and to ensure you don't leave a line or phrase out, is to picture your own house and your route to your bedroom. Allocate a line or phrase to parts of your house in order e.g. say your first line opening the door, your second putting your bag down, your third climbing the stairs. That way you'll have a visual association with the lines in the correct order and won't miss any out.

### 3. Practice makes perfect

Some people like to learn by building blocks. Memorise the first line and say it out loud. Then memorise the second and say both the first and second out loud. Memorise the third and say the first, second and third lines out loud and so on until you've covered the entire speech.

Vary your practice times – as you walk to school or queue for lunch, for example. Take five minutes out in the middle of doing something else, perform the speech twice and go straight back to what you were doing. Read the speech before you go to bed, this is a good time to learn things. Get friends, family or teachers to test you.

### 4. Cue Cards

Make some cue cards to help you remember particular lines or words that you find difficult to remember. In time you won't need these cards, but having them to hand if needed will give you more confidence.

### 5. Record your speech

When you're more or less happy with the way you plan to say the speech, record it so that you can play it back to yourself whilst you walk and before you go to sleep.

Some people insert a favourite music soundtrack under the speech. This helps give you a chronology as you'll begin to make a subliminal association between lines and different sections of the song.

### 6. Learn with your body as well as your mind.

As a rehearsal idea you may want to try line feeding. A friend will feed the line to you and you will then perform this. It is useful to put down the text as soon as you can, so that you can think about what you are doing with your body. It helps to learn the speech whilst performing it so that you are learning it in your body as well as your mind.



## Part 3 Preparing for the performance at the heat

### 1. The week of the performance

Avoid a noisy environment like a club. Shouting above music and other people's voices can strain your voice. Also avoid talking on the phone for a long period the night before. Oddly, whispering also strains the voice.

Avoid a smoky environment or working with varnish or paint. And drink plenty of water. Dehydration happens in the lead-up to the audition day, not on the day.

If you have a sore throat coming on, then steaming can do wonders.

### 2. On the day

Avoid talking in the car or bus with the heater on as this can dehydrate or harm your voice. Bring a large bottle of water and several healthy energy bars and bananas.

The workshop will include a brief warm-up to relax you.

Other ways to relax:

If you're feeling particularly nervous, eat something and drink some water, and then lie on your back with your legs on a chair.

Whilst waiting, stand with your feet parallel, hipbone-width apart and a couple of inches away from the wall, and your knees slightly bent. Rest your back against the wall and think of your spine lengthening towards the ceiling whilst your tail bone drops towards the floor. This will correct your posture so that you can breathe correctly, and will relax you at the same time.

*Think of the judges as friends who wish you well and want you to give a great performance.*

Before your speech, to increase saliva in the mouth, bite your tongue gently.