**How to Read Shakespeare Aloud**

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The idea of performing a Shakespeare speech fills many young actors with fear. However, you should remember that Shakespeare was an actor himself and wrote for fellow performers. Forget criticism and textual analysis because everything an actor needs is right there in the dialogue – you just need to know what you’re looking for.

**Clues in the imagery**

Elizabethan theater didn’t rely on scenery and lighting to create a scene, so Shakespeare had to carefully choose language that created the right landscapes and moods for his plays. For example, read aloud this passage from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* where Puck describes a place in the forest:

I know a bank whereon the wild thyme blows,  
Where oxlips and nodding violet grows.

This speech is loaded with words to suggest the dream-like quality of the text. This is a clue from Shakespeare on how to read the speech.

**Clues in the punctuation**

Shakespeare's use of punctuation was very different – he used it to signal how each line should be delivered. Punctuation forces the reader to pause and slows down the pace of the text. Lines without punctuation naturally seem to gather momentum and emotional energy.

* **Full stop (.)**   
  Full stops naturally bring the sense and energy of the line to a close.
* **Infrequent commas (,)**  
  A comma forces a slight pause in delivery to reflect a tiny development or shift in the character’s thought process.   
    
  For example, read aloud Malvolio’s line from *Twelfth Night*: “Some are born great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them.” Did you notice how the commas forced you to pause and split this sentence into three parts?
* **Repetition of commas (,)**  
  Commas can also cause a line to gather in emotional intensity. If you see lots of commas together, evenly spaced and splitting the lines into small snappy chunks, then this is Shakespeare’s way of asking you to emotionally invest in the dialogue and build up its rhythmic intensity, as in this example from *King Lear*:

... No, no, no life!  
Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life,  
And thou no breath at all? Thou’it come no more;  
Never, never, never, never, never.

* **Colon (:)**  
  A colon signals that the next line should sound as if it is responding to the previous line, as in Hamlet’s “To be, or not to be: that is the question.”

**Do Not Add Punctuation**

If you’re reading aloud a speech written in verse, you may feel the need to pause at the end of each line. Do not do this unless the punctuation specifically requires you to do so. Try to carry the sense of what you’re saying into the next line and you’ll soon discover the correct rhythm of the speech.

You should think of a Shakespeare play as a blueprint for performance. All the clues are there in the text if you know what you’re looking for – and with a little practice, you’ll soon discover that there’s nothing hard about reading Shakespeare’s dialogue aloud.