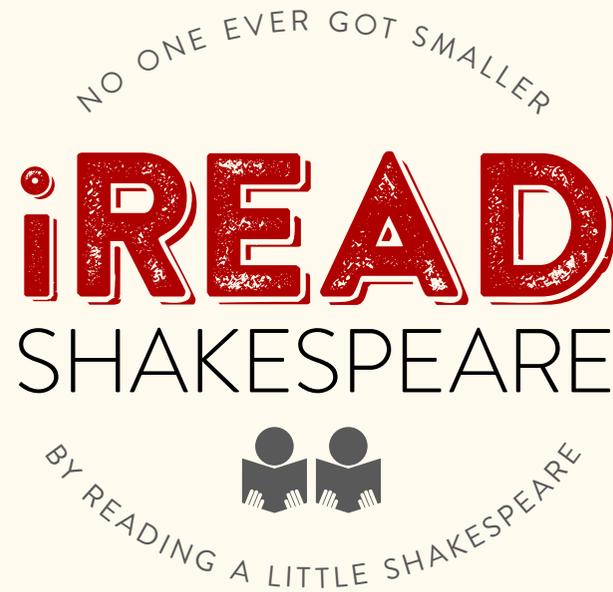


# HOW TO START A **SHAKESPEARE** READING GROUP



# CONTENTS



What is a Shakespeare reading group? . . .	3
Why read Shakespeare aloud? . . . . .	4
But it's hard, you say? . . . . .	6
How do I start a reading group? . . . . .	7
What is the format? . . . . .	8
How do we assign parts? . . . . .	10
Where would we meet? . . . . .	12
Which edition shall we read? . . . . .	13
Tips for reading Shakespeare aloud . . . . .	16
After you read the play, see a production! . . . . .	18
Resources . . . . .	19

# WHAT IS A SHAKESPEARE READING GROUP?

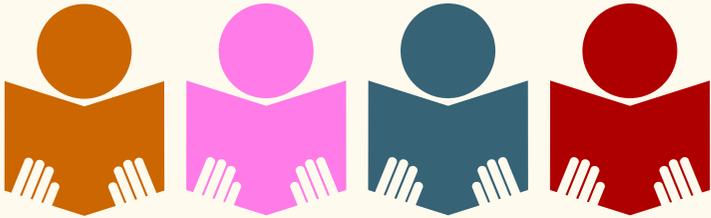


America has a long and brilliant history of Shakespeare reading groups, which are simply groups of people who get together to **read Shakespeare out loud and in community.**

There's really no secret to it—just grab a play and start reading. But for those who would like a little more information and tips that have been gleaned from other readers, we created this brochure.

Shakespeare is for everyone. And theater companies take note: more Shakespeare *readers* make more *ticket buyers* for your performances. Start a group in your town!

# WHY READ SHAKESPEARE ALOUD?



By limiting yourself to *only* seeing the plays performed, you miss out on so much. The plays are rich in meaning and stage directors must focus in on one or two themes. Every performance, by its very nature, is only one **interpretation** of the possibilities present in Shakespeare's text.

Some plays you may never experience because they are **rarely on stage** or film. Virtually every Shakespeare play is **cut** for performance, thus there are parts you may never see, especially on film. Most of the **ambiguity** on the page cannot be performed on the stage.

When an actor recites a remarkable bit of dialogue/poetry on stage, our brains simply cannot process Shakespeare's astounding **imagery** as quickly as the actor can speak it. You need time to see the words, to work them out, to let the images develop and play in your thoughts, to find their layers of meaning, to discuss them with friends.

# WHY READ SHAKESPEARE ALOUD?



**Reading requires engagement with the text**—something that doesn't happen while listening to a lecture about the play or even passively watching a performance. Many who didn't care for Shakespeare in high school find themselves captivated by the plays once they become absorbed in the process of discovering their meanings in community.

Seeing a well-done performance is a great pleasure, but it is empowering to **become an active participant** in discovering the layers and implications in the text. Reading this way makes you the director.

The intellectual engagement necessary is delightful, inspirational, rewarding, fulfilling, fun, and a worthy use of your time. Reading the plays aloud in discussion with others can become a lifelong habit that will enrich your life in ways that few other activities can match.

# BUT IT'S HARD, YOU SAY?

Yes, Shakespeare takes a little bit of work to understand at first.

But everything worthwhile takes a little bit of work—riding a bicycle for the first time, cooking gourmet food, learning to read, appreciating opera, ballroom dancing, getting a degree, playing golf, skiing, becoming a fine woodworker, having a relationship.

It takes a little bit of work. So what.

The rewards are bountiful.



# HOW DO I START A READING GROUP?



**SHORT FORM:** Just gather a few people together in a room, grab a text, and dive in!

**LONGER FORM:** Start with asking your acquaintances. Do not limit yourself to people who you think are “intellectual” or “smart.” Shakespeare is not limited to a certain genre of person, as history has shown us. Anyone who can read (or listen) can join in.

Forget everything you’ve been told over the years about Shakespeare being for the elitist or academic—that’s simply not true. Shakespeare reading groups in the 1800s and 1900s were composed of a broad section of society: coalminers, shopkeepers, dentists, attorneys, homemakers, mountain men, hobos, presidents, society ladies, factory workers . . . everyone read Shakespeare.

So invite unexpected people who don’t fit the stereotype of what a “Shakespeare reader” is supposed to look like!

# WHAT IS THE FORMAT?



Your group will find its own rhythm, but here are some starter ideas:

- Once a week, read and discuss for two hours; continue each week. With a little discussion for clarification, you can generally get through about an act per week.
- Do a close read, looking up words and references, meeting once a week, in which you might get through 150 or 200 lines each reading. A long play like *Richard III* might take six glorious months.
- Read an entire play aloud in an evening (which will run quite late for most plays).
- Start in the early afternoon, read an entire play, and have a potluck supper after Act 2 (and dessert after Act 4).

You should notice that none of these options require reading the play before you arrive at the group—no homework!

# WHAT IS THE FORMAT?

Or, if you'd like, choose a format that *does* require some preparation—reading a play or act before meeting to discuss it.

- You might ask your readers to read an act at home, then read just *select* scenes aloud from that act together, with discussion.
- You might all view a performance, then read select scenes for discussion.
- The Shakespeare reading group in Roswell, New Mexico (which has been meeting for more than a century), currently assigns a new leader every six weeks who then leads the group through a select play in any manner s/he chooses: lectures, discussion, films, presentations, question and answer sessions, games, etcetera.



# HOW DO WE ASSIGN PARTS?



Again, your group will discover what works best, but here are some ideas to get you started:

- Let the facilitator assign parts to readers at the beginning of each scene.
- Or read around the table or room, where each person reads whatever speech shows up next on the page, including stage directions.
- Or write each part on a slip of paper and put the slips in a hat; readers pull from the hat as they enter. You might want to separate large parts from small parts into two different hats, or combine a number of small parts onto one slip, making sure they won't end up talking to each other.
- Or write each part on a sticky note, post them on a wall, and let readers choose their parts as they arrive—first come, first get juicy part.

# HOW DO WE ASSIGN PARTS?

- For a full read-through at one sitting, divvy up the play beforehand (there are some “cast” lists done for you on the [iReadShakespeare](http://iReadShakespeare.com) web site). Request each reader to please skim through the play before arriving and mark their parts; even if they hate to write in their books, they can make a small pencil mark next to each speech heading.

If you have developed a useful way of dividing up the readers’ parts, please let us know!

[readers@iReadShakespeare.com](mailto:readers@iReadShakespeare.com)



# WHERE WOULD WE MEET?

Some groups meet in members' homes, rotating each week or month. If members prefer not to open their homes, there are always other options:

## Other places to meet:

- A **community room** in your neighborhood.
- Check with your **library**.
- **Hotels** have meeting rooms.
- Local **colleges** and **universities** have available rooms on weekends.
- **Corporate buildings** have meeting rooms.
- **Churches** often let members use their rooms.
- Some **restaurants** have private rooms available.
- Don't forget about **public parks** or even a **bar**.

Members can take turns creating the cast list or sticky notes each month, provide the wine or coffee, run the mailing list for reminders. Everyone can participate!



# WHICH EDITION SHALL WE READ?

We highly recommend the Readers' Editions published by us at the ISC PRESS because they are the only playbooks designed and edited specifically for reading out loud and in community:

- The text is a bit larger than other editions.
- Every line is numbered.
- Glosses (definitions of odd words) are set immediately to the right of the line you're reading so you don't have to hunt for them at the bottom of the page.
- Stage directions are expanded to help you remember who the characters are.
- Ideas for discussion are littered throughout the pages, questions are posed, attention is drawn to subtleties.
- There's room on the page to record your thoughts.
- Brief extras are included such as a pronunciation



# WHICH EDITION SHALL WE READ?



guide, tips on how to read Shakespeare's language, a chart of every character's lines in each scene, numbers of total lines of each character, even a short bit on reading poetry.

- A progress bar along the bottom of each page indicates how many more pages are in the play (in case you are waiting for dessert at the end of Act 3).

The **Readers' Editions** were created for *you!*

However, a group can easily read together from any edition. Different editions have slightly different approaches to the text:

**Arden:** very scholarly, more notes on the page than Shakespeare's text, lots of front and back matter.

**Oxford:** claims to recreate what Shakespeare "surely" intended for performance, thus there are many surprising deletions.

# WHICH EDITION SHALL WE READ?

**Pelican:** another scholarly edition with plenty of front and back matter for serious study.

**Folger:** cheap paperbacks, explanatory notes on page opposite, plenty of front and back matter for perusal.

**Barnes and Noble Shakespeare Series:** excellent for readers, if they have the play you want.

**No Fear Shakespeare** and **Shakespeare Made Easy:** every line is rewritten into modern language on the opposite page. We honestly cannot recommend that you use these sorts of editions because they provide a crutch that is unnecessary and difficult to get away from. Shakespeare is not rocket science!

**Dover Thrift Editions:** very cheap editions but serviceable; no line numbers; good copies to buy if you need extras for visitors to your reading group.



# TIPS FOR READING SHAKESPEARE ALOUD



Here are a few **tips** for any reading circle:

- Discover the various interests of your readers so you can tap them when necessary—is someone knowledgeable about mythology? Or Roman history, Elizabethan life, the tales of Ovid, astronomy or astrology, symbolism of plants and animals and stones?
- Encourage someone who loves words to see if the library or a nearby university offers access to the [OED](#), the Oxford English Dictionary, so she can discover the earlier meanings of words and relay these to the group.
- Someone might love classical rhetoric (or discover a love for classical rhetoric) and enlighten the readers on Shakespeare's astounding use of it.
- Do you have any poets or writers in your midst who are familiar with prosody or meter? They might want to point out salient features of the language as you read.

# TIPS FOR READING SHAKESPEARE ALOUD



- Perhaps someone enjoys creating or finding maps that would be useful, or genealogical charts for the history plays. Bringing in supplemental material is always fun and enlightening.
- Make your group inclusive and supportive. Never criticize others' reading. You'll notice that *every* reader misses words here and there or reverses their order or mispronounces. *Every single reader does this.* Unless it affects the meaning of the line, let it go.
- **Enjoy** your community of Shakespeare readers!

# AFTER YOU READ THE PLAY, SEE A PRODUCTION

It's always great to see a stage performance or a film of a play after you've read it—you'll notice how much more you understand and appreciate.

Here's a warning, however: Readers become critics! Especially if you've done a close read on a play, you will get a bit huffy if the interpretation doesn't follow your own brilliant ideas and insights!

The discussion with other readers after the performance is always a terrific conversation. :-)



# RESOURCES

Besides being able to buy the Readers' Editions of the plays, you will also find a great deal of free support for your reading groups at [iReadShakespeare.com](http://iReadShakespeare.com):

- Readers' "cast lists" for divvying up parts
- Background material for discussion
- Shakespeare's original source materials
- Products to facilitate your readings
- Help for finding a gathering in your area
- Fun and surprising "facts" to remember
- Suggestions for the various orders in which you might want to read the plays
- Lists of the plays by length, type, genre, etc.

*Join us! And please let us know what else you would love to see on our web site.*



THANK YOU SO MUCH!

NOW GO START YOUR **SHAKESPEARE** READING GROUP!

