

What did Shakespeare write?

Shakespeare wrote at least 37 plays. Of these, only 18 were printed in his lifetime.

The plays first appeared in quarto form. To create a quarto, large sheets of paper were folded into four and then bound. The result was a book slightly larger than today's paperbacks. In 1623, the complete works of Shakespeare were printed in what is known as the First Folio. A folio is a much larger book, which is made by folding large sheets of paper in two and then binding them.

Shakespeare's plays can be organized according to four broad categories. They are:

Comedies

A full third of Shakespeare's plays were comedies. He was considered the best writer of his day for this particular genre. Today we think of comedies as works that make us laugh. According to the classical definition of the term, a comedy is a work that ends happily. Many of Shakespeare's comedies actually deal with serious themes. However, they do have many bright comical moments, hilarious characters, and witty dialogue. The happy endings in these plays, more often than not, involve marriage or the reconciliation of lovers.

The Comedies:

A Midsummer Night's Dream	Much Ado About Nothing
The Comedy of Errors	As You Like It
Love's Labour's Lost	Twelfth Night
The Taming of the Shrew	All's Well That Ends Well
The Two Gentlemen of Verona	Measure for Measure
The Merchant of Venice	The Merry Wives of Windsor

Tragedies

Shakespeare's tragedies are among the most highly respected works of literature ever created. In these plays, tragic heroes grapple with important issues like love, death, revenge, jealousy, ambition, and ingratitude, to name a few. By definition, a tragedy is a work that ends unhappily. The protagonist suffers a tragic end as a result of some inner flaw or error in judgement. Some of the greatest speeches ever written appear in Shakespeare's tragedies.

The Tragedies:

Troilus and Cressida	King Lear
Timon of Athens	Hamlet
Coriolanus	Macbeth
Julius Caesar	Romeo and Juliet
Antony and Cleopatra	Othello
Titus Andronicus	

Histories

Ten of Shakespeare's plays deal with English history. The period covered in these plays extends from the time of King John, who reigned 1199 to 1216, to the time of King Henry VIII, who died in 1547. These plays basically served to arouse patriotism and loyalty to crown and country. The plays also warned about the dangers of civil war. Despite the fact that these plays are considered histories, Shakespeare does not hesitate to alter facts to tell a better story.

The Histories:

King John	Henry VI, Part One
Richard II	Henry VI, Part Two
Henry IV, Part One	Henry VI, Part Three
Henry IV, Part Two	Richard III
Henry V	Henry VIII

Romances

Among the more interesting of Shakespeare's inventions are his Romances, which may also be considered "tragi-comedies" in that they begin in a tragic mode but end happily. These plays often involve sea travel, wrecks and adventure, families being separated and reunited in the end, and tragic misunderstandings followed by forgiveness and reconciliation.

The Romances:

Pericles	The Winter's Tale
Cymbeline	The Tempest

As well as writing plays, Shakespeare gained credibility and critical acceptance by writing poetry. He wrote two long narrative poems, a series of sonnets, a collection of short verse, and an extremely short, enigmatic piece called "The Phoenix and the Turtle." Critics are still puzzled as to what this work is all about.

The Poems:

Venus and Adonis	The Passionate Pilgrim
The Rape of Lucrece	The Phoenix and the Turtle
The Sonnets	

- Choose one of the plays that you are interested in knowing more about. Without reading the play, compile some basic information on it. What is it about? Who are the major characters? Where does the action take place and during which time period? Write a short plot summary of the play to present to the class.
- Many of Shakespeare's plays have been turned into feature films. Visit your local video store and compile a list of the movies you find there that are based on Shakespeare's work. In groups, choose a title to rent. Pick a convenient time, make some popcorn, and spend an evening with the Bard. Report to the class how the video compares with what you expected a Shakespeare play to be like.

Quoting Shakespeare — everybody does it!

*"Shake was a dramatist of note;
He lived by writing things to quote."*

— H.C. Brunner

One student criticized the play *Hamlet* because, in his opinion, it was made up of a whole string of clichés. This may seem true to us today, but when Shakespeare first wrote the play, his words were fresh and new. What is certainly indisputable is that Shakespeare is very much a part of our everyday language.

The next time you watch a Sherlock Holmes movie and you hear the famous sleuth say that "The game is afoot," you should know that he is quoting Shakespeare.

Here are some other common phrases and lines that were first spoken by Shakespeare's characters. How many have you recently heard or used?

an eyesore
apple of her eye
as white as the driven snow
bated breath
breathe one's last
budge an inch
dead as a doornail
devil incarnate
dog will have his day
eaten me out of house and home
for goodness' sake
foregone conclusion
fortune's fool
green-eyed monster
household words
in my heart of hearts
into thin air
it smells to heaven
Knock, knock! Who's there?
laughing stock
man of steel
murder most foul
neither rhyme nor reason
not a mouse stirring
rave new world

one fell swoop
pomp and circumstance
primrose path
remembrance of things past
short shrift
sound and fury
strange bedfellows
sweets to the sweet
the be-all and the end-all
the play's the thing
the game is up
the very witching time of night
to be, or not to be
to thine own self be true
tower of strength
too much of a good thing
we have seen better days
what the dickens
what's done is done

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- **Be a bard or storyteller:** Write a short story or poem in which you use as many of the above familiar phrases as you can.
 - We quote Shakespeare every day and his words have become a part of our language. For the next few weeks, scan newspapers, magazines, and song lyrics, listen to TV and movie dialogue, and pay attention to everyday conversations. Be on the look-out for examples of Shakespeare's words and phrases being used. If the quotation appears in a print medium, cut out and paste or copy the page upon which it appears. If the quotation is used in any other medium, make a note of how it was used. Share your findings with the class in the form of a report with conclusions.