

The Shakespeare Shuffle

Exploring Shakespeare's syntax

What's syntax?

Syntax is a fancy word for the arrangement of words in a sentence. Its roots mean 'together' and 'arrange'. Although Shakespeare never used the word syntax in his plays and poems, it started to appear in other English books shortly before he was born in the mid-16th century.

Why are Shakespeare's words sometimes in such a strange order?

Shakespeare's characters often speak in poetic form, or verse. Sometimes words are arranged in a way that fits the verse or supports a rhyme. Shakespeare almost certainly studied Latin in school. Latin is relatively free when it comes to word order, and those choices can signify nuances in meaning. It's possible Shakespeare's training in Latin at school increased his interest in and facility with syntax, and that's reflected in his writing.

Let's explore one line:

"To his good friends thus wide I'll ope mine arms"

Laertes says this line about Polonius when speaking to Claudius in the play *Hamlet*.
("ope" means "open").

1. Cut a piece of paper into 10 equally-sized pieces. Write each word onto its own piece of paper:

to	his	good	friends	thus	wide	I'll	ope	mine	arms
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2. Now move the pieces of paper around to rearrange the words in an order that makes more sense to you:

I'll	ope	mine	arms	thus	wide	to	his	good	friends
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3. How many other ways can you rearrange the words, and still have it mean the same thing? For example:

thus	wide	I'll	ope	mine	arms	to	his	good	friends
mine	arms	thus	wide	to	his	good	friends	I'll	ope

4. Try to find as many variations as you can. Express each variation, out loud if possible. Then express the line as Shakespeare wrote it.

- Why do you think Shakespeare wrote Laertes' line in the way that he did?
- What's the effect of this particular word order? How does it feel to express the thought this way?

Some more lines for you to shuffle

Using index cards or scrap paper, choose a line of Shakespeare and write a single word on each piece of paper. Lay them out in a line to make a sentence. Then begin to move the words around.

Start with the simplest way we might say the sentence today, and then discover all of the variations you can find without changing the meaning of the sentence.

With another piece of paper and a pencil, write down each of the variations you discover, and speak them out loud if you can. You might be surprised how many ways you can rearrange the words and still retain the meaning.

Under love's heavy burden do I sink.
(Romeo from Act 1, scene 4 in *Romeo & Juliet*)

With love's light wings did I o'erperch these walls.
(Romeo from Act 2, scene 2 in *Romeo & Juliet*)

O full of scorpions is my mind, dear wife.
(Macbeth from Act 3, scene 2 in *Macbeth*)

My mistress with a monster is in love.
(Puck from Act 3, scene 2 in
A Midsummer Night's Dream)

These words like daggers enter in mine ears.
(Gertrude from Act 3, scene 4 in *Hamlet*)

She was a vixen when she went to school.
(Helena from Act 3, scene 2 in
A Midsummer Night's Dream)

Questions to consider

- How many variations of each line were you able to find? How easy was it to find a simple, straightforward version? Did you have any favourite variations?
- When you go back to the version Shakespeare wrote, what features do you notice? What's the effect of that specific word order? Why do you think the character speaks the line in this particular way? What might it tell us about the character and their situation in the moment?
- Consider Romeo's two lines above. The one on the left is from early in the play, when Romeo is in love with Rosaline. The one on the right refers to Romeo's love for Juliet. How are the two expressions of love different? How does the syntax reflect this difference?

Strategy for the future

Whenever you come across a line in Shakespeare that's confusing, you can try this technique. The first step is to make sure you know what all the words mean. Then see if moving the words around can help you make sense of the line. The more time you spend with Shakespeare, the more you'll get used to Shakespeare's syntax. Who knows, maybe you'll start playing around with syntax in your own writing or speaking!