

my Julius
Caesar

myShakespeare's

Julius Caesar

Curriculum Guide

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Tips and Tricks for Teaching *Julius Caesar*

In the Beginning...

Poll the Class

- What do you know about Shakespeare? When did he live and what was his world like? What are some of the plays you have read or heard of?
- Have you seen any of Shakespeare's plays performed? Have you seen any film versions or adaptations of Shakespeare's plays (i.e. Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet*, *10 Things I Hate About You*, etc.)? Have you ever performed anything written by Shakespeare?
- What do you know about Shakespeare's language? Are iambic pentameter, prose, and verse familiar or unfamiliar terms? Do you know any famous quotes from Shakespeare? If so, what do you think they mean?
- What do you know about *Julius Caesar*? Any famous lines? Plot points? Characters? Where is it set, and when? What are some themes of *Julius Caesar*?
- What are your anxieties about Shakespeare? Is there anything that has confused you in past attempts to study Shakespeare? Is there anything that you're dreading as you embark on *Julius Caesar*?

Play Around with the Text: A Sneaky Shakespeare Exercise

- Distribute the first 20 lines of dialogue in *Julius Caesar* to students. Work through the text as a class to unlock any unfamiliar phrases.
- Divide the class in half, into a "Team Marullus" and "Team Cobbler." Have students select from a pile of index cards listing "secret styles," such as horror, western, detective, opera, soap opera, sitcom, musical, farce, and so on.
- Have the class exchange dialogue in this style, either as a group or student-by-student down the line. Encourage students to go big—this is Shakespeare, after all.
- At the end of the exercise, re-group and have students guess Shakespeare's intended setting and style for the scene. Perform the scene in this style—togas optional.

Pre-Detecting: Interpreting Key Lines out of Context

- Distribute a worksheet of 5-8 key lines you choose from Act 1 of *Julius Caesar*.
- Read each line aloud, without giving the students any context. Who do you imagine is speaking the line—a man or woman, someone old or young, powerful or weak, good or evil? Human or supernatural? To whom (or what) is he or she speaking? Have students write their ideas under each quote.
- Discuss how students arrived at their conclusions, using clues from the text.

Throughout the Play...

Weird Word Log

- Select ten archaic or unusual words from your students' first reading assignment and have students guess meanings, first by the word alone, then by interpreting it in context.
- Have students create a Weird Word Log to keep track of unusual words as they continue to work through the play. For each word, students may wish to write a definition or synonym and write and illustrate a sentence of their own that employs the word.

Character Bookmarks

- Distribute index cards to students, along with copies of the Dramatis Personae.
 - Discuss the cast list with your students, with an eye towards relationships and social status.
 - Then have students depict the characters on their bookmarks based on what they've inferred from the Dramatis Personae.
 - On the back, students can list character traits as they learn them, and continue to use these cards as a reference throughout the play.
 - Remind your students that they can view the character blurbs for each scene, which might help them deduce what's important for each character as they move through the play.
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In-Class Activities and Ideas

The following are brief overviews of general exercises that may enhance your students' experience. They can be adapted for use at any point in the play, depending on your curricular needs.

Staging Julius Caesar

As your students work through the play, ask them to generate ideas for staging the particular sections of the text you're reading. Some reliably interesting moments include

- The opening scene, featuring tribunes and plebeians.
- The festival scene, featuring many of our main characters.
- The visit of the conspirators to Brutus in Act 2, Scene 1.
- Act 3, Scene 1, featuring Caesar's death and several key speeches.
- Act 3, Scene 2, featuring the reading of Caesar's will.
- Act 4, Scene 2, featuring a visit from the ghost.
- Act 5, Scene 3, featuring Cassius' suicide-by-proxy.
- The play's final scene.

Once you've generated some ideas, show your students the corresponding performance videos from myShakespeare (at the links above). Discuss the following questions with your students:

- myShakespeare uses intimate, direct-to-camera staging. What is the effect of this choice on the viewer? How does it impact your understanding of the words?
- What are some other staging options for these scenes? Do certain staging ideas suggest different emphases? Different points of view? Different moods or atmospheres?
- What is conveyed by the staging ideas you have generated and by the film representation you have seen?
- Do you feel that some scenes can be dramatized more effectively through one medium or the other?

NOTE: This exercise can be easily expanded into a filmmaking or performance exercise using the same section of text (see Culminating Essays and Projects). You may also consider dramatizing moments that occur off-stage, such as the pirate attack, King Hamlet's funeral, the Royal Wedding, and action that occurs after the play's conclusion.

How Do Actors Convey Meaning and Tone?

The following activity is adapted from Reading Shakespeare with Young Adults by Mary Ellen Dakin.

Distribute copies of a famous speech from the play to students. Some suggestions include

- [Cassius' speech about Caesar in 1.2](#)
- [Brutus' speech in 2.1](#)
- [Brutus' speech in 3.2](#)
- [Antony's several speeches in 3.2](#)
- [Cassius' speech in 4.2](#)
- [Cassius' speech in 5.3](#)
- [Brutus' speech in 5.5](#)
- [Antony and Octavius in 5.5](#)

First, have the students highlight words and phrases that appeal to any of the five senses—sight, sound, smell, taste, or touch. Then, have them underline and label examples of personification. Finally, ask your students to read the passage aloud. Once your students have completed these steps, discuss the following questions:

- How does the passage sound? Do you hear a rhythm? Are the words soft and musical, or harsh and discordant?
- What is the mood of this speech? how do the imagery and personification contribute to the mood?

After the discussion, screen the corresponding myShakespeare performance video (at the links above) for your students, asking them to keep in mind their earlier conclusions about the speech. Once they've viewed the scene, your students should discuss the following questions:

- How does the actor use his or her voice as a performance tool? What kinds of choices in the sounds of their voices are the actors making, and how do those choices affect the meaning of the text?
- What else does the actor do to add meaning and emotion to these words? How does he or she use gestures, facial expressions, body language, and movement to enrich the words?
- How do the camera shots and angles contribute to the drama of the scene?

You Be the Host

With this exercise, your students will have the chance to step into Ralph's and Servilia's shoes. First have your students view a few examples of our character interviews for scenes they've already read.

Then, have them choose a scene that might make for an interesting interview. You might have them choose a scene that does not feature a myShakespeare interview, or to interview a character who doesn't get as much interview time in the hot seat. Some options include

- Portia and Calpurnia together, for a female perspective on events
- Messala, Lucilius, or Titinius, for a fresh perspective
- The secondary conspirators, like Cinna or Decius Brutus
- The Soothsayer, after all is said and done

First, students should draft a set of questions to ask the character(s). They should consider

- How the character might be feeling in this scene?
- What does the character want at this point in the play?
- What might the character be hiding, and how can Ralph or Servilia get them to reveal it?
- What thematic kinds of questions could Ralph or Servilia ask to help a viewer better understand the play?

Once your students have drafted scripts, the options are endless. They can stage a live interview for the class, film it studio-style, or even create podcast radio interviews.

Act-by-Act Resources

Act 1

Discussion Questions, Activities, and Writing Prompts

For each act, many of the discussion questions and writing prompts are covered in some way by our character interviews, so we recommend showing students the interviews as preparation. The questions begin as brief, basic discussion questions for in-class conversation or short writing assignments, and build to more complex questions for deeper discussions, interactive activities or longer essays. Each prompt is designed to be adaptable for your classroom needs.

A Few Basic Questions...

- How does the play set a tone of tension in the first few scenes?
- Why does Cassius disapprove of Caesar? Does Brutus share those feelings? To what extent?
- What is the social structure of Rome? Who has the power, and how are they viewed and treated by those who don't?
- What is the role of signs and omens so far in the play?
- What do the different characters believe about the role a leader should play in society?

Digging Deeper...

An Introduction to Rome

Review the dialogue between the Plebeians and Tribunes in the [first scene](#), and be sure to watch the character interview with Marullus and the Cobbler. Based on their exchanges, how would you describe the state of affairs in Rome? What do we learn about the the social structure of Rome from the way these characters speak to each other? Why do you think Shakespeare opted to start the play with these characters, whom we never see again?

The Soothsayer

Students may be familiar with the Soothsayer's famous lines in [1.2](#). Unfortunately, these lines don't tell us much about who the Soothsayer is, and what role he might play in Roman society. To discover more, students might conduct a web quest in search of information about soothsayers and haruspicy in ancient Rome. What are the origins of haruspicy? How much power did the practice hold among Romans? To what extent did the practice influence events?

What Is Lupercal?

A little research goes a long way. Students are likely unfamiliar with the festivals of ancient Rome, so the [festival scene](#) might raise a few questions in your class. This scene focuses on Lupercalia, which is one of many festivals that would have been celebrated annually in Rome. Students should research the roles of festivals in general in ancient Rome. What role did they play in society? Do they have modern parallels? You might also consider assigning students other festivals to research, like Saturnalia or Agonalia to give them a sense of the scope of the role these festivals played in society.

The Role of a Leader

In [Act 1, Scene 2](#), we meet Brutus and Cassius, who will become the two most prominent conspirators in the play. In this scene, they discuss their concerns about Julius Caesar's recent behavior, and the public's reaction to his rule. Students should close read the dialogue between the two, beginning on line 25, and ending on line 188, as well as Cassius's final speech, lines 304-319. How does their

discussion depict Caesar? Does it seem to match up with Shakespeare's depiction of Caesar that we've seen so far? What are their objections to Caesar's leadership? Do their claims seem legitimate? Such questions can spark larger discussions about the role of humility in successful leadership, or the responsibility citizens bear in checking a leader's power.

Who's Who of the Conspirators?

In Act 1, Scene 3, we meet several of the major conspirators, who gather to plot against Caesar. It's a useful point to pause with your students to review characters. Consider having them make a who's who line-up of the conspirators. What are their key characteristics, and what role do they play in the conspiracy? This will be particularly illuminating as you prep students for [Act 2, Scene 1](#).

Act 2

Discussion Questions, Activities, and Writing Prompts

A Few Basic Questions...

- What do you think of the conspirators' plans to assassinate Caesar? Is Caesar's behavior and growing power enough to justify their decision? Why or why not?
- What role, however small, do the women play here? How do Calpurnia and Portia attempt to influence their husbands' behavior?
- In what ways do the various characters attempt to manipulate each other through deception? How does this contribute to the conflict of the play?

Digging Deeper...

The Power of a Letter

Letters play a big role in Act 2 of *Julius Caesar*. There are the fake letters that Brutus stumbles upon in [Act 2, Scene 1](#), the contents of which convince him to join the conspiracy. There's also Artemidorus' message of warning to Caesar, which he recites in [Act 2, Scene 3](#), and which—we'll later learn—Caesar never receives. These are cases of manipulation and miscommunication—and both serve as examples of the power of letters in the play. Consider these two cases as you craft a letter of your own. Imagine yourself as a Roman citizen—are you a conspirator? A loyalist? A tribune? A plebeian? What do you want to happen as Act 3 approaches? Draft a letter to the character you think is best suited to act on your desires for Rome. How would you convince them to join in your cause—whether it's assassinating Caesar or remaining devoted to him?

Rhetoric

Students should watch the Character Interview with Artemidorus at the end of [Act 2, Scene 3](#). The interview explores the importance of rhetoric in human communication, and provides a good opportunity for students to review the kinds of skills necessary in effective communication. Approximately five minutes into the interview, Artemidorus and Servilia engage in a classic rhetorical

exercise: saying the same thing in as many ways as possible. You can recreate this exercise with your students. Try having them come up with a list of phrases a person uses every day— "It's good to see you," "See you again soon," or "Thanks for the help" are all examples of common phrases we encounter in day-to-day conversation. Students can pick a phrase to assign to a partner, and then that partner should try rewriting the phrase in a number of ways—say ten or twenty? Then, the partners can read and discuss each other's work. Their conversation should focus on the ways in which diction and syntax can add nuance to stock phrases, changing the meaning and connotation.

Imagine a Conversation

At the end of Act 2, Scene 2, Julius Caesar invites the conspirators to withdraw with him for some wine. Yet whatever conversation they have occurs off screen—and we don't see the group again until [Act 3, Scene 1](#). Must have been an interesting conversation, right? The conspirators spend an hour or so talking to Caesar, before killing him in front of all of Rome in the next act. What do you imagine went on during that conversation? Students could write the dialogue for Act 2, Scene 2b, or perhaps write a summary of their imagined conversation.

The Role of Women

Act 2 features female characters more than any other part of the play. We see Calpurnia attempting to convince her husband Caesar to stay home from the Capitol, given her alarming dreams. And we see Portia worrying over her husband Brutus and asking the Soothsayer for news. What can we learn from these moments about the role of women in Shakespeare's Rome? Do they have any agency, voice, or power? Or are they there simply to serve their husbands?

Act 3

Discussion Questions, Activities, and Writing Prompts

A Few Basic Questions...

- What role does rhetoric play in Act 3? How do Brutus and Antony attempt to convince the plebeians of their cause?
- What does Caesar's depiction of the plebeians suggest about the role the masses play in political upheaval? Are the plebeians depicted as ignorant followers, or do you identify with their behavior?
- Why do you think the assassination takes place on such a public occasion?

Digging Deeper...

Fight Choreography

The deadly scuffle between Mercutio, Tybalt, and Romeo occurs without much stage direction from Shakespeare. Using clues from the [dialogue in Act 3, Scene 1](#), students should try their hand at choreographing the fight for performance. Where would they position the actors? What would the fight look like? How long would it last?

Romeo on Trial

At the end of Act 3, Scene 1, the Prince banishes Romeo from Verona as punishment for Tybalt's death. Is that punishment fair? Wise? Just? Have your students put Romeo on trial, and determine a punishment they feel is most appropriate, given the circumstances of Tybalt's death. For evidence, they should use dialogue and stage direction from [Act 3, Scene 1](#). Feel free to break students into groups—defense and prosecution. Consider appointing one student the judge, who will be responsible for giving the verdict and the sentence, after hearing the cases of both sides.

Storyboarding Speeches

Act 3 features two speeches that contain a great deal of visual imagery: [Juliet's speech in 3.2](#), while waiting for the Nurse to return. [Friar Laurence's speech to Romeo in 3.3](#), telling him to "Hold thy desperate hand." Have students choose a speech, select specific lines to illustrate, then draw 10-20 successive images creating a short film sequence for these lines, paying particular attention to metaphors and imagery. The more specific images you can come up with, the better!

Act 4

Discussion Questions, Activities, and Writing Prompts

A Few Basic Questions...

- Why doesn't Juliet inform the Nurse of her plans to fake her own death, when she has confided in the Nurse before?
- What do their arguments reveal about Juliet and Capulet's relationship? What are Juliet's responsibilities as a daughter, and what are Capulet's as a father?
- What is Juliet's state of mind at the end of Act 4, Scene 3? Why does she decide to move forward with her plan?

Digging Deeper...

Capulet's Performance

myShakespeare provides two different performances of Capulet's speech upon hearing of Juliet's death in 4.5—a "stunned version" and a "sad version." Students should view both performances, noting the actor's tone and expressions. Which version seems more appropriate to the text, given the students' understanding of Capulet's character? Students might perform their own versions of the speech, making choices they think best serve the scene and character. Students should view the [character interview in 4.5](#) for inspiration.

From a Servant's Perspective

At several points in Act 4, we get a glimpse of the action from Capulet servants' and musicians' perspectives. Have students review [4.2](#) and [4.5](#). How do the servants and musicians react to the goings-on in the Capulet household? In what ways does their presence provide comic relief for family tragedy? For a creative approach, imagine a few of the servants and musicians are on break from their frenzied work, and write a scene of conversation. As they gossip about the events of the past few scenes, what do they say to each other? What do they think of the Capulets? Of Paris? Of Juliet's death? What rumors might be going around?

Juliet's Soliloquy

In [Act 4, Scene 3](#), Juliet delivers a famous soliloquy as she prepares to drink the potion that will make her appear dead. She goes through wide range of emotions in the span of just a few minutes. Have students watch myShakespeare's performance video and the character interview at the end of the scene. Then have them go over the text of Juliet's speech, writing emotion/feeling words in the margins for each feeling she seems to be experiencing. Students should circle words and images that connect to these emotions as they go.

Act 5

Discussion Questions, Activities, and Writing Prompts

A Few Basic Questions...

- What specific errors in judgment lead to Romeo's belief that Juliet has truly died? How might this have been prevented?
- Who is to blame for the young lovers' tragic end? To what extent do Julius Caesar bear responsibility for their own deaths, despite their young age?
- Do you believe Julius Caesar died for love, or something else entirely?
- Do you believe that the Montagues and Capulets will truly reconcile after this? Why or why not?

Digging Deeper...

Debate: Who's to Blame?

In the final lines of the play, the Prince says, "Some shall be pardoned, and some punished." But *who* gets pardoned? And *who* gets punished? Students can debate these very questions in anything ranging from an informal discussion to an all-out trial—whatever works for your classroom. In whatever form this debate takes, students should make a "pardoned" list and a "punished" list, with evidence exonerating or indicting the accused, and—if guilty—what their punishment should be.

Acting the End

Act 5, Scene 3 has a lot of moving parts and a great many characters. That makes it a great opportunity for your students to test out their acting chops, because there's something for everyone, from bit players to major stars. If the class is small, everyone can be involved in some way, but larger classes may need to be split into groups. Encourage students to pick an unconventional style, setting, or time period in which to adapt the scene (Old West? Corporate America? Mars in the future?). Students might also adapt the language for their chosen setting, capturing the tone and meaning with words appropriate to their choice. More kinetic learners can be in charge of blocking and choreography, deciding where and how the actors physically interact on your stage.

Julius Caesar in a Hurry

Trying to summarize a long and complex play is a difficult task. Summarizing is not only a good review exercise, but it also helps us to prioritize what is most important: how is plot related to the meaning of the play? In this case, we'll keep things simple: just try summarizing the final scene of Act 5. What are the most essential plot points that occur in the scene? What details can you leave out? Help students strike a balance between key information and extraneous detail by emphasizing the minimum that readers need to know in order to understand the ending of the play.

Reflection

Reflect on your experience reading *Julius Caesar* and watching myShakespeare's performances and interviews. Write a 1-2 page reaction paper. You may wish to respond to one or more questions from the following list:

- What moments in *Julius Caesar* resonated most strongly for you?
- How did watching myShakespeare's *Julius Caesar* affect your experience of studying *Julius Caesar*?
- Did the interviews make clear anything that you had missed in reading the text, or provide you with additional insight into characters' thoughts and motivations?
- Were there moments when you wish Ralph had asked characters additional "tough questions"—and if so, what questions, to whom, and at what point? How did the actors' performances match or fail to match what you imagined of the roles when you read the text?
- If you were creating myShakespeare's *Julius Caesar 2.0*, what would you keep, and what would you change?

Culminating Essays and Projects

Thematic Essays

Below are a few prompts for essays that grapple with some of Julius Caesar's overarching themes. These prompts are designed to be open-ended and invite student interpretation of the play as a whole.

Much of *Julius Caesar* grapples with the old idea of courtly love, often mocking it outright. Research the concept of courtly love and pick three scenes from the play that mock its conventions to analyze. What is it about courtly love that Shakespeare seems to be critiquing? Are there other forms of love in the play that he seems to celebrate?

Julius Caesar makes use of several motifs that illuminate the play's themes: Juliet as the bride of death, darkness and light, dreams, etc. Choose one motif—or two, if you're feeling ambitious. To what effect does Shakespeare use these recurring ideas and imagery in the play? How does your chosen motif affect the viewer's understanding of the play and its themes?

Who is to blame for Romeo's and Juliet's deaths? The Friar and the Nurse? Mercutio and Tybalt? Montague and Capulet? Julius Caesar, themselves? Make your case with evidence from the text. Consider choosing multiple characters and comparing and contrasting the extent to which they bear responsibility for the play's tragic end.

Performance Projects

By performing *Julius Caesar*, students can gain new insight into the play's themes and characters. Of course performance projects can go far beyond the standard group project, so we've listed a few different options you might consider as ways to cap off your class's *Julius Caesar* unit:

- Divide your class into groups and assign each group key scenes from the play to perform for the entire class. But here's the catch: each group must reinterpret the scene for a different setting: Ancient Greece, Victorian England, Communist Russia—whatever you can dream up.
- Have students script new combinations of characters and perform those scenes. What would Benvolio say to Juliet? What would happen if Montague and Capulet got stuck in an elevator together? What might the Prince and the Nurse have to say to each other about all the events in Verona?
- Have students stage key scenes and film them cinema-style. Students can even edit them all together into a movie trailer for *Julius Caesar*. You can shake things up by assigning them different genres: *Julius Caesar* as a romantic drama, for example. Or an action flick, perhaps?
- If your class isn't a good fit for group projects, you can assign individual students monologues or soliloquies to perform. If the class can handle it, encourage some friendly competition by awarding a prize for the best performance at the end. Points can be awarded for accurate memorization, interesting interpretations, impressive costumes, etc.
- Get the entire school involved by having students perform live for everyone, or by screening filmed versions of their scenes. Faculty judges can review the scenes on the spot to add a live-show atmosphere.