

Voice and Text Preparation Resource Pack

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Teacher-led exercises created by RSC Education

This pack has been created to give you and your students some insights into the approaches that actors take when working on text and specific speeches while at the RSC. The work has been written with both students and teachers in mind. Most of them can be explored by a teacher with a whole group or by individual students as they prepare their monologues.

Warm-up – using your voice effectively

Before you start working on the text, stretch to invigorate the body and release tension.

- Stand on both feet, lift the arms and alternately stretch the right and then the left arm up towards the ceiling. As you do so feel the ribcage shift and open. Allow this action to create an awareness of the breath.
- Yawn to release tension in the throat and jaw.
- Release your shoulders by lifting them and dropping them. Become aware of the tension we usually hold in this area and notice that shoulder tension quickly spreads to the arms, neck, shoulders, jaw and tongue.
- Energise the lips and tongue by pursing the lips and then smiling widely. Repeat this several times. Smack the lips noisily but make sure you are not locking the back of the neck. Blow ‘raspberries’ through the lips and then blow up the cheeks and then use the fingers to ‘pop’ them. Repeat several times.
- Stretch the tongue out of the mouth and circle it slowly round from nose to ear, to chin, to ear and back to the nose.
- In order to exercise the middle of the tongue start by making an ‘S’ and then change the sound to a ‘SH’. Repeat S/SH/S/SH/S/SH/S/SH etc.
- The tip of the tongue can be exercised by working with F/TH/F/TH/F/TH/F/TH.
- Exercise the whole mouth by ‘chewing toffee’.
- Singing is an excellent warm-up because it explores pitch, engages the breath and exercises the articulators. Sing a verse from a well-known song and use it to explore range by singing it as opera, singing it quietly, slowly, quickly etc. Select a song that can be sung as a round if you are working with a group as this will sharpen focus, encourage listening and enhance the group dynamic.



What to Expect

It is important not to be intimidated by the heightened quality of the language which at first will seem unnatural. Word order may also be different from our modern usage. Sentences and phrases will probably be longer than you are used to. Speaking in verse might feel unrealistic at first. There might be a more formal feel to the structure of the language. There will probably be more use of metaphor and simile, alliteration, assonance, debate, and rhythm than in contemporary texts. Don't let this get in your way.

This is how your character expresses themselves. It is their natural language. Don't feel you need to turn it into modern speech. Instead, embrace it and enjoy the muscularity of the speech (the way the tongue, the lips, the jaw engage in the texture of the language).

Although punctuation was probably put in by editors, it suggests changes in thought and energy and can be useful but remember it is a *written* way of indicating these changes and you need to find a spoken way of conveying phrases, new ideas and the development of argument. Use punctuation to release the energy of the text rather than to restrict you.

Teacher Activity:

- Choose a speech and hand out to your class.
- Ask them to read the speech out loud and answer any questions they may have about language.
- Students read their speech out loud and walk around the space, changing direction as they arrive at punctuation.
- Suggest that every member of the class gets two chairs and places them facing each other. The students speak the text, shifting chairs every time they come to a new punctuation mark. See how the rhythm builds and changes during the speech; what does that say about their character's frame of mind?

This exercise should give them a sense of how the speech develops from one idea to another. Discuss the discoveries made during the activity.



Before Learning the Words

Once you understand the play, re-read your character's speech and notice how his/her journey develops through the *words*. Look at your character's lexicon or personal 'dictionary'. For example, some of Shakespeare's characters use imagery and language of the natural world, the military or mythology. This reflects their thinking and is significant. Make a list of words your character uses that connect to the world of the play. Use these words to explore the number of syllables, the energy of the consonants, and the length and musicality of vowels. They can become part of your warm-up.

Teacher Activity:

- Hand out Lady Macbeth's speech.
- Students speak the speech together as a class. Discuss the imagery.
- Students re-read the speech and circle any words that relate to a specific theme (for example nature – raven, milk etc.). Discuss the world she is describing.
- Ask them to read through the speech and notice these words. How does this help make sense of the speech? Do they discover anything about her character? Does it raise any questions?

Iambic Pentameter

Iambic: An unstressed beat followed by a stressed beat makes up an iambic foot.

Pentameter: there are five feet to the line. This means there are ten beats, five stressed and five unstressed. This creates a rhythm that is similar to a heartbeat.

The iambic pentameter that forms the basis of the verse should be used to help feel the 'pulse' but is often broken to create a deliberate jar in the rhythm. Go with this rather than trying to 'smooth it out'. Don't become trapped by the meter, but explore the rhythm as another clue to the way in which the character expresses themselves.

No Need to Overstress

WE DON'T STRESS EVERY WORD IN A PHRASE. Sometimes young actors feel they need to stress in order to be clear but overstressing hinders clarity. It also destroys the natural rhythm of the language. Look at the most important word or words in a line. There are lots of ways of making a word or words stand out – stress is only one of them. In natural speech we 'spread' or give space to certain words and contract or 'elide' others. We also use inflection and modulation (the movement of the voice) to convey meaning.



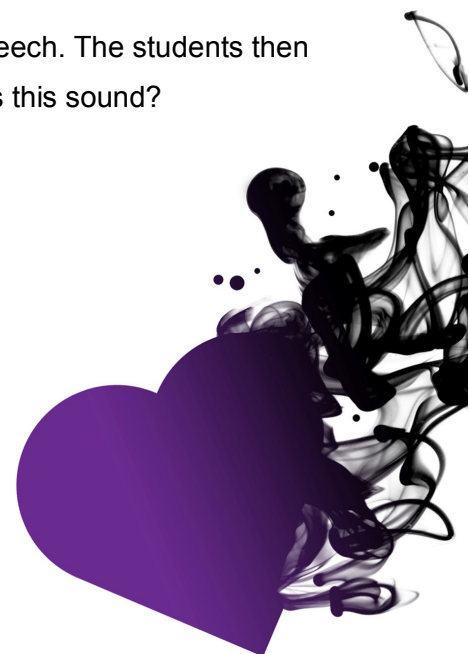
Start with the Words

Before making too many decisions about the background of the character (this can happen later), look at the words. In the Elizabethan era actors were only given their lines and not an entire script. (Entire scripts had to be copied out by hand, which was very time-consuming, so were not given to every actor.)

If the emotion is what we hear rather than the words, the scene becomes generalised and we don't hear the detail of the text. The language needs to trigger the emotion, rather than the emotion being superimposed on the text (for example just playing an entire speech on one emotion).

Teacher Activity:

- Hand out Romeo's 'what light through yonder windows breaks' monologue.
- Students walk around the room, saying the speech out loud.
- Students form a circle and only read out the final words of each line. What kind of words are these? What mood do they create?
- Ask your students to read only the first words of each line. What is the difference?
- Tell your students to imagine that they have to propel each line from beginning to end. Ask the group to read the first few lines this way. Was there a different energy to the speech when the momentum was upheld throughout the line?
- Ask the students to find all the questions in the speech. The group gets into pairs and takes turns asking their partner the question they have found. The other person has to listen carefully and try to answer in their own words.
- Get back in a circle. Ask them to find any examples of opposites in a speech. The students then read out the text while paying attention to the opposite words. How does this sound?





The Rhetoric

To help you understand how the character thinks, look at how they use and structure their language.

- How does she or he try to persuade the other characters? Do they appeal to their better nature, state what is logical or declare their status and authority?
- Do they repeat themselves?
- Do they change tack if they are not succeeding?
- How often do they ask questions? Are these questions answered?
- If there is a question, ask it actively as if expecting an answer rather than turning it into a statement.
- Antithesis, words or ideas placed in opposition to each other, such as day/night, death/birth, can help you understand the way the argument is framed.
- What images do they use in their language? Do they draw on a theme such as religion or justice?

Most of all, 'taste and savour' the rich and vibrant language. Get your body and voice engaged and enjoy yourself. Notice the impact of a monosyllabic line. It is often emphatic. When a multi-syllabic word is surrounded by monosyllables, notice how it takes the focus.

Throughout the pack you will see words like 'release'. This comes from an understanding that freeing the language or the text results in 'lifting the words off the page' and transforming them from written to spoken language. This happens when the actor has fully accessed and achieved ownership of the language rather than 'reciting' it. There are many excellent books which give exercises for both freeing the text and releasing the voice.