

How did Shakespeare decide whether his characters should speak in verse or prose? A rough answer is that he followed the stage conventions of his time. It was conventional for prose to be used:

- in proclamations, written challenges or accusations, and letters, for example, Macbeth's letter to Lady Macbeth telling of his meeting with the witches.
- by low status characters: servants, clowns, drunks. The low status villains, Iago in *Othello* and Edmund in *King Lear*, speak many prose lines.
- to express madness: King Lear, Hamlet, Edgar as Poor Tom, and Lady Macbeth (all high status) express their madness, or assumed madness, in prose.
- for comedy: Falstaff and Sir Toby Belch, both knights (high status), use prose as comic characters. Among Shakespeare's comedies, almost ninety per cent of *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is prose, and over half of *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It* and *Much Ado About Nothing*.

But Shakespeare never followed any rule slavishly, and you can always find exceptions to the conventions. Low status characters, for example, Juliet's Nurse and Caliban, sometimes speak verse, and high status characters switch to prose, for example, King Henry V. After the assassination of Julius Caesar, Brutus uses prose for his speech to the citizens of Rome, but Antony uses verse.

The context of a speech sometimes explains why prose or verse is spoken. For example, Macbeth speaks some prose when talking to the low status murderers. The villainous Iago typically speaks prose, but switches to verse when he is with Othello.



- 1 Check through the play you are currently studying to discover who uses verse and who uses prose. Suggest reasons for the difference.
- 2 As you work on the prose lines on the accompanying worksheet, look out for imagery, lists and patterns (repeated words and phrases, balanced contrasts). They will help your understanding of character, mood and tone.
- 3 Write a set of 'director's notes': advice to the actors on how the speech might be performed in a dramatically effective way. For example, are there pauses? Should repeated words be stressed? What pace, tone and volume should the actors use? Then speak and act out the language!