

**Suggestions for using HOW TO THINK LIKE SHAKESPEARE
for a Seminar for First-year Students
Prepared by Scott Newstok
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How to Think like Shakespeare is my love letter to the craft of thought — pondering what we've lost in education today, and how we might begin to recover it.

This book grew out of a convergence between my teaching and my parenting.

Over the past decade, I've been reading a lot of great work about Shakespeare's career, from pedagogical practices to the inherently collaborative nature of theater. This inspired me to reshape my teaching, to help students approach him as a *maker*: a play-w-r-i-g-h-t. I hope this helps inspire them to think of themselves as makers, too.

During this same decade, my own kids have been progressing through elementary and secondary school. Some of the frustrating educational reforms they've confronted strike me as jarringly at odds with the still-beneficial aspects of a Shakespearean education.

As I am quick to concede in the Preface, Shakespeare's own education was nasty, brutish, and *long*. Just to be clear: I'm not proposing that we reinstate corporal punishment, tedious rote memorization, or schools that exclude *anyone*.

Yet it's blinkered to dismiss Shakespeare's instruction as nothing but oppressive. Thinkers trained in this unyielding system went on to generate world-shifting insights, founding forms of knowledge—indeed, the scientific method itself—that continue to shape our lives.

Liberated thinking was induced by an apparently inflexible program of study. And we're far from immune from our own inflexible idols: our educational system is too often *rigid where it should be yielding, and lax where it should be rigid*.¹ It's getting the balance right between rigidity and flexibility that's tough.

I should say at the outset that this is a very *book-y* book. By that I mean: it's thick with quick quotations, playful footnotes, provocative epigraphs, and other bibliographical apparatus. While the book is short (14 chapters, 8-12 pages each), it's densely woven. Students might at first find the reading process rather slower than they're used to experiencing. They could benefit from a little guidance about how citation functions.

It's a kind of *archive*, or perhaps better *ark*, of favorite phrases, much as Renaissance writers would gather adages or epigrams or proverbs for students and friends. Quoted passages tend to make my own reading pause, as the verbal texture becomes uneven. What happens to this little fabric of thought now that it's woven into new cloth?

¹ Alfred North Whitehead sounds like he could just as easily be writing today as a century ago. *The Aims of Education*, 1916 (The Free Press, 1967): 13.

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This volume began to take shape once I recognized that I'd been assembling something akin to a commonplace book, itself the genesis of so much writing from this era. Throughout, I've stitched together *an almost endless collection of scattered thoughts and observations* into a kind of patchwork, or *cento*, of passages that have inspired me.

Be forewarned: quotations come *"swift as thought," as Homer used to say*. I do this precisely because thinking like Shakespeare means thinking with *each other's / harvest*. And I'm eager for this eclectic chorus of voices to be *the cause that wit is in other[s]* (to cite Falstaff!).

Honestly, I'd love for a first-time reader just to page through the **illustrations**. Each chapter is accompanied by an enigmatic image. This aligns with the humanist tradition of "emblem" books — you'd see an enigmatic woodcut, and be induced to wonder: *what could that mean?*

<http://emblematica.grainger.illinois.edu>

The image should catch your curiosity, and entice you to read more . . . there are photos of a vase, book art, an ancient puzzle, a postcard, a sketch of pillows, trellised wallpaper, Tibetan Buddhist nuns, a Japanese handscroll, a tool alphabet, cave stencils, a bemused James Baldwin standing next to a Shakespeare statue. *What on earth does all this have to do with "thinking like Shakespeare"?* That's a good start. . .

Here's another way that it's a "book"-y book — there are a number of so-called "easter eggs" hidden throughout the volume. For instance, the epigraph to the Table of Contents says you don't have to read the book, just as the epigraph to the Index says an author doesn't have to *write* the book. (Spoiler alert: I did in fact write the book.)

Every one of Shakespeare's works is cited at least once. But, as should quickly be clear, I use Shakespeare as a kind of springboard for thinking — not the end of thinking.

So I also cite, howsoever fleetingly, over 500 other figures, from ancient Athens to contemporary Memphis.

Topics range widely across disciplines, eras, and nations, as the book seeks to speak to a wide range of audiences about enduring educational quandaries.

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Preface: What's Past is Prologue

The very first footnote cautions against quoting Shakespeare out of context! I hope this prepares students for the playful, dialogic nature of the book. It's meant to provoke thought, not mandate it. Many students will be unfamiliar with digressive footnotes. I always encourage mine to experiment with this alternative "voice" at the bottom of the page. It offers another register for their writing.

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1. Of thinking

Ken Robinson's "Do Schools Kill Creativity" is the most-watched TED talk of all time:

https://www.ted.com/talks/sir_ken_robinson_do_schools_kill_creativity?language=en

His humor is disarming. But can students pick up on some of his self-contradictory assertions?

I think it would be fascinating to have students reflect upon what kinds of educational policy debates were taking place in their home school districts when they were seven. (For that matter, it would be salutary for professors to undertake similar research about what was going on in *their* schools at age seven . . .)

The book strives to address common concerns not only in literary pedagogy but across disciplines. To this end, I strongly commend Paul Lockhart's "A Mathematician's Lament" (2009):

https://www.maa.org/external_archive/devlin/LockhartsLament.pdf

Until recently, Raphael Lyne maintained a useful blog, "What Literature Knows about your Brain":

<https://www.english.cam.ac.uk/research/cogblog/>

Barry Edelstein, Julia Lupton, A. D. Nuttall, and Michael Witmore have all pondered Shakespearean thinking, via drama, political theology, philosophy, and metaphysics. Susan Stewart's *The Poet's Freedom* (2011) and Reginald Gibbons' *How Poems Think* (2016) are worth the while.

A digital version of T. W. Baldwin's exhaustive study *Small Latine & Lesse Greeke* (1944) can be found here:

<https://franklin.press.uillinois.edu/baldwin/>

As contemporary examples of commonplacings, I recommend these blogs

Maria Popova's *Brainpickings*

<https://www.brainpickings.org>

Shane Parrish's *Farnam Street*

<https://fs.blog>

S. Abbas Raza's *Three Quarks Daily*

<https://www.3quarksdaily.com>

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2. Of ends

It's estimated that *teachers lose between 60 to 110 hours of instructional time in a year because of testing and the institutional tasks that surround it.*

<http://www.ncte.org/library/NCTEFiles/Resources/Journals/CC/O242-nov2014/CC0242PolicyStandardized.pdf>

Surely students will be able to relate sad tales of such assessment-obsession. I hope, however, they can counter them with anecdotes of genuine learning.

Flexner's *The Usefulness of Useless Knowledge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017 [1939]) remains a remarkable defense of inquiry not driven by immediate ends:

<https://nias.knaw.nl/stories/usefulness-useless-knowledge/>

If I could assign just one essay to be read by every educator, legislator, student, and parent, it would be "The Tyranny of Three Ideas," the Prologue to E. D. Hirsch's *Why Knowledge Matters* (2016):

http://hepg.org/HEPG/media/Documents/Introductions/Hirsch_Why-Knowledge-Matters_Prologue.pdf?ext=.pdf

Hirsch, wrongly maligned as a reactionary, makes the progressive case that access to knowledge and vocabulary is a civil rights issue. The Knowledge Matters campaign confirms this premise:

<http://knowledgematterscampaign.org>

The Forest of Rhetoric catalogues over 400 rhetorical figures:

<http://rhetoric.byu.edu>

Why not have each student research a different one, report back to the class, then try them out in an essay?

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3. Of craft

Encourage students to poke around Brad Pasanek's "helter-skelter anthology," *The Mind is a Metaphor*:

<http://metaphors.iath.virginia.edu/metaphors/10705>

If possible, I recommend screening two documentaries, both of which (indirectly, yet profoundly) convey the concept of craft: *To Be and to Have* (2002) and *Jiro Dreams of Sushi* (2011).

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4. *Of fit*

Here are just four articles that make visceral the impoverished vision of the ed-tech-industry:

- Michael Godsey, “The Deconstruction of the K-12 Teacher: When kids can get their lessons from the Internet, what’s left for classroom instructors to do?” *The Atlantic* (March 25, 2015):

<https://www.theatlantic.com/education/archive/2015/03/the-deconstruction-of-the-k-12-teacher/388631>

- Kristina Rizganov, “Inside Silicon Valley’s Big-Money Push to Remake American Education.” *Mother Jones* (November 3, 2017):

<https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2017/11/inside-silicon-valleys-big-money-push-to-remake-american-education/>

- Nellie Bowles, “Silicon Valley Came to Kansas Schools. That Started a Rebellion.” *The New York Times* (April 21, 2019):

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/21/technology/silicon-valley-kansas-schools.html>

- Jared Woodard, “Rotten STEM: How Technology Corrupts Education,” *American Affairs Journal* (August 2019):

<https://americanaffairsjournal.org/2019/08/rotten-stem-how-technology-corrupts-education/>

But again, I don’t want to be full of gloom. Ask students to consider optimal times when they have “fit” in a learning environment. That need not be school — it could be with a sports coach or teammate; during a music lesson; alongside a family member . . . but someplace where there was congruence between person, task, and guide. And then urge them to contemplate how to cultivate such congruence in their classrooms today.

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5. *Of place*

We all just underwent a massive experiment in placelessness. Surely students will have some poignant anecdotes about how disorienting the abrupt shift to “remote” learning was in the midst of the Coronavirus quarantine.

I wrote about “close learning” back in 2013:

www.closelearning.org

Nicholas Carr, “The Prehistory of the MOOC”:

<http://www.rough.type.com/?p=1892>

Spiros Protopsaltis and Sandy Baum ask: “Does Online Education Live Up to Its Promise?” (2019):

<https://mason.gmu.edu/~sprotops/OnlineEd.pdf>

Diane Whitmore Schanzenbach confirms that yes, no matter what technocrats try to tell you, class size *does* matter:

http://nepc.colorado.edu/files/pb_class_size.pdf

On school as *scholé*, see Agnes Callard, “What Do the Humanities Do in a Crisis?”

<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/annals-of-inquiry/what-do-the-humanities-do-in-a-crisis>

On the place/*loci* method see Frances Yates’ *The Art of Memory* (1966):

<https://slate.com/culture/2015/11/the-art-of-memory-by-frances-yates-the-historian-who-recovered-the-story-of-simonides-memory-palace.html>

I always have students memorize something for in-class recitation — whether a poem or paragraph. It’s old-fashioned, I know, yet productive.

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6. *Of attention*

For the “Removed” photo series, see the photographer’s Project Statement:

<http://www.ericpickersgill.com/removed/>

A friend of mine, who teaches philosophy at a community college, asks students to untether themselves from social media for a week. When asked how the experiment went, many describe an admixture of agony and relief. It’s worth trying out.

William James’ *Talks to Teachers* (1899) underlines the need for attentive practices in education:

<https://www.uky.edu/~eushe2/Pajares/JamesTalksToTeachersFirstEdition.html>

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7. Of technology

This chapter was something of an experiment; I don't know if it was successful. I really wanted to make two simple points: digital technology isn't necessarily *better* technology; and we all use all kinds of technology in teaching — including books, paper, pens, whiteboards, tables, and even the arbitrary classroom unit (whether it's an hour or some other measure of time). But it's technology in the guiding hands of the learned teacher that helps situate us toward meaningful ends.

Sean Coughlan, "Computers 'Do Not Improve' Pupil Results, Says OECD" *BBC* (September 15, 2015):

<http://www.bbc.com/news/business-34174796>

This blog (whose owner I haven't been able to discern) alternates from inspiring me to making me despair:

<http://www.digitalcounterrevolution.co.uk>

The Socratic dialogue "Meno" is one of the earliest examples of the promises and limits of technology and teaching:

<https://marom.net.technion.ac.il/files/2018/09/Meno.pdf>

<https://www.thoughtco.com/slave-boy-experiment-in-platos-meno-2670668>

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8. Of imitation

I hope you can have some fun with this chapter!

Try out some experiments in imitation — even merely copying longhand a favorite passage, pretending that you are writing it. Many, many writers attest that this bizarrely *works*. As I mention in the chapter, I’ve also had students “translate” the first sentence of “The Declaration of Independence” into contemporary English. It’s harder to get this right than it at first appears! This exercise was inspired by Danielle Allen’s brilliant book:

<https://wnorton.com/books/Our-Declaration/>

Louie Dinh, “How Benjamin Franklin Would’ve Learned To Program” (September 20, 2013):

<https://github.com/louiedinh/python-practice-projects/blob/master/content/blog/how-benjamin-franklin-learned-to-program.md>

Emerson’s “Quotation and Originality”:

<https://emersoncentral.com/texts/letters-social-aims/quotation-and-originality/>

Seneca's letter 84 to Lucilius, which popularized the longstanding “bee” metaphor:

https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Moral_letters_to_Lucilius/Letter_84

Donna Gorrell applies these practices to contemporary pedagogy in “Freedom to Write—through Imitation”:

<https://wac.colostate.edu/jbw/v6n2/gorrell.pdf>

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9. Of exercises

My students chuckle when they see all of Erasmus's variations on the phrase "your letter has pleased me greatly," an example of *copia*:

<http://burton.byu.edu/Composition/CopiaGuide.pdf>

I start by simply writing that phrase on the board . . . and then seeing how many variations we can create spontaneously as a class.

A facsimile of the remarkable speech on behalf of immigrants from *The Book of Sir Thomas More* can be viewed online, along with recitations by Ian McKellan, Harriet Walter, and other actors and refugees:

<https://qz.com/786163/the-banned-400-year-old-shakespearean-speech-being-used-for-refugee-rights-today/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Bss2or4n74>

Nick Wells provides a modern analogue of the *Progymnasmata* in "How to Teach Like an Elizabethan Champion" (playing off of Lemov's *Teach Like a Champion* [2010]):

<https://englishremnantworld.wordpress.com/how-to-teach-like-an-elizabethan-champion/>

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10. Of conversation

Burke's essay "Literature as Equipment for Living" is short but powerful:

<http://users.clas.ufl.edu/burt/FrenchConnections/Lit.pdf>

Simon Garfield, "10 Old Letter-writing Tips that Work for Emails" (October 28, 2013):

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-24609533>

First-year students can especially benefit from being introduced to some of the formal expectations regarding email. While these will seem old-fashioned, they will help attain the kind of responses they seek, whether from professors, administrators, or potential employers.

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11. Of stock

I often have students compile a “commonplace” book across the course of a semester. It can be simple: they can “archive” just one favorite phrase or sentence from every reading. By the end of the term, they’ll have dozens of insights to hand.

On “The Matthew Effect,” see Timothy Rasinski, Nancy Padak and Joanna Newton, “The Roots of Comprehension”:

<http://www.ascd.org/publications/educational-leadership/feb17/vol74/num05/The-Roots-of-Comprehension.aspx>

Jon Youshaei, “What Beyoncé & Shakespeare Have In Common,” (2016):

<http://www.everyvowel.com/beyonce-shakespeare-key-to-creativity-success-lemonade>

John Florio’s quirky translation of Montaigne can be found online:

<http://www.luminarium.org/renascence-editions/montaigne/>

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12. Of constraint

It's a mind-stretching experience to have students write in the sonnet form. At the least, they should try translating a favorite poem into their own words (as one of my students at the prison did, without prompting).

For an online anthology of sonnets on the sonnet, see

<http://www.sonnets.org/about.htm>

Elizabeth Bishop's remarkable drafts of "One Art," held at Vassar College, are transcribed here:

<https://bluedragonfly10.wordpress.com/2009/06/12/one-art-the-writing-of-loss-in-elizabeth-bishop's-poetry/>

Interviews with Jericho Brown:

<http://www.benningtonreview.org/jericho-brown-interview>

<http://lightboxpoetry.com/?p=516>

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13. Of making

It's a simple but eye-opening task to have students examine this long and winding history of a word that they take for granted, like "kind" or "nice." If your institution doesn't subscribe to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, a free resources is Douglas Harper's *Online Etymology Dictionary*:

<https://www.etymonline.com>

Dictionaries from Shakespeare's era can be found here:

<https://leme.library.utoronto.ca>

This BBC/British Museum *A History of World in 100 Objects* series is my favorite:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/ahistoryoftheworld/about/british-museum-objects/>

Episodes are only 15 minutes long, and range widely across the globe, time, and disciplines.

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14. Of freedom

All primary-source materials related to Shakespeare's life (including Greene's snide remark about an "upstart crow"), can be found scanned on the Folger Shakespeare Library's *Shakespeare Documented* collection:

<https://shakespearedocumented.folger.edu/exhibition/document/greenes-groats-worth-witte-first-printed-allusion-shakespeare-playwright>

Baldwin's singular essay can be found online:

http://aalbc.com/authors/why_i_stopped_hating_shakespeare.html

On positive and negative liberty:

<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/liberty-positive-negative/>

The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute makes public his speeches and sermons:

<http://kingencyclopedia.stanford.edu/>

In 2015 I wrote an essay on Martin Luther King, Jr., titled "The Crafts of Freedom":

<https://chapter16.org/the-crafts-of-freedom/>

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Kinsmen of the Shelf

This section's title comes from Emily Dickinson, "Unto my Books - so good to turn," (J604, Fr512), Houghton Library - (383c)

https://www.edickinson.org/editions/1/image_sets/235782

Quote Investigator, a.k.a. Garson O'Toole, whose website I've often gratefully consulted:

<https://quoteinvestigator.com>

As the epigraph from Samuel Johnson confirms, "*The greatest part of a writer's time is spent in reading, in order to write.*" Ask students to make an annotated list of the top 10 books that have influenced their thinking. I have my advisees craft these bio-bibliographies — it nudges them to account for how they came to be where they are, and, looking ahead, for where they want to go.

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Thanks and Thanks

My former student Mya Gosling's comic *Good Tickle Brain* discusses the history of editing this line that titles this section, "And Ever Thanks?" (November 24, 2016):

<https://goodticklebrain.com/home/2016/11/24/and-ever-thanks>

We all know that teachers can't be thanked enough; worse, they aren't. Encourage students to think back on an influential mentor, and craft a letter to them. We all know how precious such notes are, and they do as much good to the sender and the recipient.

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Index

Some Index entries will reward a careful reader with a smile — see, for instance, “footnotes, on the necessity of” or “pill, swallow a Shakespeare” or even “thinking.” (My own kids groan at these “dad jokes,” but I hope they help keep the reading light.) I’ve found that the very notion of an Index is itself foreign to some digital natives, who presume that keyword searching has superseded index. But the index still embodies human judgment, and human labor. Dennis Duncan is writing a history of the book index, from the medieval period to Kindle — previewed here:

<https://www.the-tls.co.uk/articles/index-a-celebration-of-the/>