MACBETH
by William Shakespeare
EDUCATION PACK
Welcome to the National Theatre’s education pack for Macbeth

Through imaginative and innovative in-school, on-site and online activities, NT Learning opens up the National’s repertoire, artistry, skills, and the building itself, enabling participants of all ages to discover new skills and experience the excitement of theatre-making. If you’ve enjoyed this background pack or would like to talk to us about getting involved in NT Learning activities, please contact us on learning@nationaltheatre.org.uk or 020 7452 3388.

Jenna Omeltschenko
Touring Partnerships Manager, NT Learning
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Once a director has a script, they need to prepare their own interpretation of the play. The director decides what messages and information they want to communicate to the audience, and how they are going to do it. A common preparation technique is a ‘facts and questions’ activity, in which the director and cast discuss questions and agree on interpretations.

Using Act 1 scene 3 (when Banquo and Macbeth come across the witches) as a starting point, create a table with two columns. In the first column note the main facts – information that is clearly included in the text: what the characters say and the stage directions. In the second column note the questions - pieces of information that are not explicitly given by the playwright but which a director and actors need to think about to interpret the play. An example has been started for you, below. You could apply this exercise to any scene in the play.

**Act 1, scene 3 - examples**

Some of these questions can be answered by the text in later scenes. Those that cannot be answered by finding clues in the text are what is left open for the director and the actors to interpret themselves.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Facts</th>
<th>Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Macbeth is the Thane of Glamis</td>
<td>How long have Banquo and Macbeth been away fighting?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Banquo and Macbeth have been fighting in a battle</td>
<td>Who are the three witches and where have they come from?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

![Image](https://example.com/image.png)

Tom Mannion, Joseph Brown and the cast of Macbeth
Credit: Brinkhoff Mogenburg
Begin this exercise by exploring a range of different rhythms, call and response style. You could speak these or tap them out on a table.

Explain what iambic pentameter is by breaking it down. What does pent mean? How many sides does a pentagon have? An iamb is a Di Dum. Iambic means stresses, one stress on, one stress off.

So there are 5 stresses on and 5 stresses off:

Di Dum Di Dum Di Dum Di Dum Di Dum (10 beats)

• Get this rhythm going with your group. Clapping hands, stamping feet.
• If you can, get everyone up on their feet and moving about. Put a break at the end of each line of 10 beats.
• Bring it back to sitting but keep it going, softly, like a heartbeat.
• Now get students to put it into the language, using lines from the play.
• Stand 10 students in a line and give each of them a piece of paper with one ‘beat’ of the line on it, then get them to each read their part in turn, repeating and playing with the stresses on different bits of the line to get a sense of the most important beats and therefore the sense of the line. Thinking about which words are stressed helps both the actors and the audience understand what is being said. For example, you could use this line, spoken by Lady Macbeth when Macbeth returns from killing Duncan, Lady Macbeth says

And **wash** this **filthy** witness **from** your **hand**
Thinking About Character - Where Do You Stand?

Put a chair in the middle of the room – this represents a key event in the story - give each of your students a character from the play and ask each character to position themselves in relation to the chair, depending on how they felt about the event.

You might like to use some of the following:

- Macbeth becoming Thane of Cawdor
- Duncan's murder
- Macbeth being crowned king
- Macduff killing Macbeth in the final battle

Walk around the room and tap each character on the shoulder. Ask them to explain (in role) why they have chosen to stand where they have. You could even bring the event to life and ask students to improvise their reactions to the scene.

Thinking About Character - Dream Casting

Ask your students to think about who they would cast in the key roles in the play? They can use anyone, dead or alive, real or fictional, drawing on the essence of their character. For each person that they choose they will need to justify why they feel they are suitable to play that character.

Once you have seen the production, discuss the casting decisions that Rufus Norris made and why you think he chose to make them.

- How did the casting decisions contribute to the director’s interpretation of the play?
- How did the casting decisions impact on students’ view of particular characters?
Popular criticism of Lady Macbeth is that she is either manipulative and power hungry or a strong woman who wants to break free of the constraints of being a woman in her time. Some productions portray her very much as a loving wife who is willing to do anything to help her husband and Germaine Greer in 2015 described her as an empty-headed ditz who doesn’t understand her husband at all. If you have seen the 2018/2019 National Theatre production, you will have seen a Lady Macbeth suffering with mental illness as well as being a loving wife.

**Discussion:** Divide the class into groups and give them different standpoints on Lady Macbeth. Ask them to defend their point of view using textual evidence.

- Manipulative and power hungry
- Trapped in the body of a medieval woman but wanting the power of a King
- Loving wife
- Stupid and not understanding of the situation she is getting herself and her husband into
- Still dealing with the trauma of losing a child which has affected her mental health
Drama: Give students time in groups to try and act out key scenes from Lady Macbeth’s narrative, including her first appearance when she receives the letter (Act 1, scene 5), the scene between Lady Macbeth and Macbeth following Duncan’s murder (Act 2, scene 2), and her sleepwalking scene (Act 5, scene 1). They should try to convey the point of view they have been given using tone of voice, gesture, and levels/positioning of characters on your ‘stage’. In each group one person must be the director responsible for portraying the particular reading of the text.

In the 2018/2019 National Theatre production, we see her dead body and it is clear she has slit her wrists. How do the different perspectives on early scenes impact how students feel about this portrayal? Would they, based on the position they are working with, present it differently?

Formative Assessment: Have students perform the drama before they defend their perspective. Students in the class need to guess what kind of Lady Macbeth was being portrayed and can give feedback to help improve the characterisation. Once each group has performed they can present their argument for seeing her in this way. Students can then vote on which was the most convincing argument.

Summative assessment: Give the class one of the key scenes you have explored and present it as an exam question: Starting with this scene explore how Lady Macbeth is presented in Macbeth.
Exploring Character

Macbeth

The National Theatre 2018/2019 production of Macbeth starts with a real battle rather than only reports from the sergeant and the captain (though they are included). This gives us a very particular impression of Macbeth from the outset.

Read Act 5 scenes 3 & 5 and identify the different mindsets Macbeth goes through annotating in students texts as you go along. Some mindsets are implied whereas some are more explicit. For those that are implied, students should identify the language Shakespeare has used to show how Macbeth might be feeling. Ask students to consider what direction they would give an actor playing that part.
Drama: Stage the battle in class using the reports to guide you. Give out the parts mentioned in the reports and either work out the order of events yourself first and read them aloud while students have to enact them or ask students to work it out themselves using only the text as their guide.

Create a conscience corridor for Macbeth in Act 5: Ask students to create a mind map of all the factors that are on Macbeth’s mind in Act 5. One student plays Macbeth, you will then need to have students representing: women, the witches, Lady Macbeth and then you could include more abstract concepts like panic, ambition, fear, bravery (or whatever your students came up with). Students form a corridor that Macbeth must walk down, as Macbeth walks down the corridors all the factors playing on his mind must say something.

Assessment: Using Act 5 scene 5 as a starting point explore how Macbeth is presented throughout the play. This is a good extract to choose because it encompasses so many aspects of Macbeth’s journey through the play and will trigger a lot of ideas.
Exploring Character

The Relationship between Banquo and Macbeth

Although Macbeth and Banquo’s relationship is only really visible at the start of the play it is an important litmus test for Macbeth’s state of mind in the play. It also shows the deterioration of morality in the play as chivalric codes of honour all but vanish when Macbeth has his battlefield partner murdered. This is very important as the play begins with the end of a civil war. During the war the Thane of Cawdor has been a traitor against King Duncan. We learn that Duncan often mistrusts those close to him and that this is a world with very little true friendship. The relationship between Banquo and Macbeth at the start and that between Macduff and Malcom show that friendship is rare and must be tested.

Group work: Using Act 1 scene 3 as a starting point for finding evidence that each of these statements is TRUE

- Banquo is a threat to Macbeth
- Banquo is ambitious himself
- Banquo is supportive of Macbeth
- Banquo is a suspicious character
- People seem to overlook Banquo
- Banquo is perceptive

Students should then quote hunt through the play (you could give groups different acts and scenes) looking for evidence that these statements are true. Some students may be able to come up with statements of their own. Students could create posters for each statement with the evidence.
**Drama: Macbeth’s reaction to Banquo’s ghost**

It may be useful to consider/ask students to research protestant and catholic points of view on ghosts. Although the audience for Shakespeare would have been theoretically Protestant, not so long ago the country was Catholic, meaning that superstitions were very much alive and well.

- Protestants believed that ghosts were an ill omen suggesting something bad is going to happen.
- Catholics believed that ghosts were restless souls sent to purgatory who had to come back to earth to settle their unfinished business.

Students should enact the scene as though Macbeth believes the ghost is a warning that something bad will soon happen and then try it again as though Macbeth believes the ghost is actually Banquo’s restless soul. Which lines become emphasised depending on the reading? How does his reaction to Lady Macbeth change depending on the reading?

**Assessment:** Ask students to write about Shakespeare’s use of the supernatural in Act 3 scene 4. They should draw upon their understanding of the context in their explanation of the ghost’s presence at the Banquet.

- What does it show about Macbeth’s state of mind?
- How does the religious context possibly affect the way a contemporary audience would see the ghost?
- How do other characters in the scene react to Macbeth’s breakdown?
Exploring Themes

The Supernatural

Drama: Rufus Norris, the director of the National Theatre’s latest Macbeth production, said of the witches that he thought they could represent nature turning against man in quite an apocalyptic way. If you have access to rain/ thunder sticks you could ask students to create a sound scape of the opening scene:

1. Begin by listing all the different noises and sounds you might expect during a Scottish storm (use pictures if this is hard to imagine). The 2018/2019 production made use of the idea of cliffs and flags so you could suggest waves on rocks or flags flapping.
2. Ask students to pick the noise they want to make and go around the room listening to each noise individually.
3. Now you can start with one noise and, as the teacher, ask students to add in particular noises.
4. Use gestures to indicate louder or softer and perhaps speed.
5. Select 3 students to perform the witches lines amidst this noise.
6. For added effect, black out the room and spotlight the witches if you can.
Exploring Shakespeare’s language: Act 2 scene 4: Other super natural things happen in the play which directors very rarely include, including in this production.

Have students read this scene and then transform it into a descriptive piece of writing, ensuring they use at least 3 pieces of Shakespeare’s own language.

• Read the scene and ask students to select words and image that give them a strong impression of the supernatural.
• Students can mix and match the words and phrases they have made to create a poem.
• If you have time cutting the words out and sticking them to images of the Scottish landscape, horses or a burial ground can be very evocative.
• Use the found poem as a starting point for a longer piece of descriptive writing.
• Read the pieces aloud then ask students to discuss why they think Shakespeare has created this atmosphere at this particular juncture in the play.

Assessment: Use this activity as a build up to answering a question on either the supernatural or the settings Shakespeare uses in the play. Students could begin by mind mapping the other locations in the play that they feel have a particular atmosphere.
Power

Macbeth is striving for power throughout the play and then by the end is struggling to hold onto it. The play raises a number of issues including: power and gender, power and god, the contrast between true leadership and tyranny.

Discussion: Give each student in the class a character (you will need to have a list to ensure there are enough parts, some people will need to be soldiers/messengers etc.) Ask the students to line up in order of who they think has the most power in the play.

There will be a number of discussions taking place because students may have different interpretations of the question. This is a good thing and you should try to draw out the strands that are there. Possible questions to ask them are:

• What point in the play are they talking about?
• Do they mean the play as a dramatic text or the play as though it’s real events?
• Do they mean physical power or psychological power?

This task can take 15 minutes or an entire lesson depending on what you want to use it for.

Drama: Take 1 or 2 scenes from the play and ask students to read them in pairs or groups. They should practice the scene trying to use body language and tone of voice to convey which character has more power in the scene. Perform the scenes and students should decide based on Shakespeare’s language as well as the performance which was the most convincing.

Students could think about whether a sound track for their enactment would work and if so what it would be. If they had a theme tune personally, what might it say about them?
Exploring Themes

Violence

**Discussion:** Most versions of this play that have been filmed are a 15 certificate yet the play is studied in classrooms of children as young as primary. Do students think that violence and gore on stage or on the page is tamer or easier to deal with than on film?

**Writing:** Ask students to write to one of the following people/ organisations arguing that more young people either should or should not be able to watch or read Macbeth

- BBFC
- Their classroom teacher
- A primary school head teacher
- A theatre which allows schools to come and watch the play

**Discussion 2:** If students have seen the NT production ask them how they felt about the added scenes. Particularly think about the scene where Duncan is seen to be murdered and Lady Macbeth is dying and found dead.
Exploring Shakespeare's language: Give students a list of types of violence in the play (or they can come up with it themselves): battlefield, murder, infanticide, regicide, vengeance, suicide. Then ask them to find quotations that show how Shakespeare presents that type of violence in the play through his language when describing it and any other factors they think are relevant (e.g. who is doing it/ talking about it). Share the quotations and collate the different portrayals of violence that are in the play.

Assessment: Ask students to write an essay answering the question: How does Shakespeare use violence in the play Macbeth? OR Choose one key scene which uses violence and ask them: Starting with this extract from the play, explore how the theme of violence is presented in Macbeth.
Introducing the plot with active storytelling

Active story-telling involves story-telling the narrative from beginning to end, moving from one major ‘event’ to the next, introducing most of the characters and making sure that your students (actors) have all the important information about the narrative they need.

This exercise requires some preparation: you will obviously need to be familiar with the characters and narrative yourself! In addition, you may wish to have materials such as:

• Character name badges
• Key lines from the play printed off individually
• Important props or pieces of costume

Sit your students in a large circle. Begin the process by asking the group to imagine the location at the beginning of the play: e.g. ‘Our play, Macbeth, starts off in a ‘desert place’ in Scotland. What are deserted places like: friendly and welcoming or spooky and lonely? What’s the weather like in Scotland: sunny/ dry/ wet/ windy/ cold?’ etc.

To set up the ‘events’ of the play, allocate roles to members of the group and invite the different characters onto and off of the ‘stage’ at the appropriate times. You may want to think about staging events that happen before the action begins, for example the battle that Macbeth and Banquo have been fighting in, or Lady Macbeth bidding Macbeth farewell before he heads off to fight in the battle.

You may wish to put students into positions you have imagined in advance, or, better still invite the actors to create the picture themselves: e.g.

• ‘This is King Duncan and this is his son, Malcolm: how would they stand relative to each other? (Students then choose where/ how to stand)
• In comes Macbeth, who’s just won a bloody battle for the King: how would he walk in, would he stand/ kneel/ bow?’

Credit: Richard Hubert Smith

The company of the Macbeth UK and Ireland tour

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When the students are up on the stage, use the opportunity to engage them with the characters they are playing, and invite the rest of the group to do the same. Some techniques you could use include:

- Asking questions of characters: as students won’t yet know the play, this will need to be focused on things that they can imagine about characters’ emotions and thought, e.g.:
  ‘Macbeth’s on his way back home from winning a battle: how do you think he might be feeling?’
- Getting the group to re-cap on the story so far: this is helpful to make sure that they are all up to speed with what’s happening
- Setting up ‘photograph’ poses for key events: you may want to invite individual students to be the ‘photographer’ here. Not just to take the picture, but to set up the group how they want them to be positioned. If you have a camera handy, you could take photographs and create a display in your classroom, which can be a shortcut to thinking about how a scene may be staged later in your exploration of the play
- Relative status of characters
- Asking individual students to read pre-printed, key lines from the script at key moments, or to show how relationships between characters change
- Asking students (especially those without named roles) to compose tweets updating followers about events that are happening: e.g. ‘turns out @macduff isn’t of woman born #gutted #longlivetheking’
The Company

LADY MACBETH .......................... Kirsty Besterman
MALCOLM ................................ Joseph Brown
WITCH .................................. Elizabeth Chan
FLEANCE ................................. Nisa Cole
DOCTOR / ENSEMBLE .................. Reuben Johnson
MURDERERS ......................... Helen Katamba, Brad Morrison and Hauk Pattison

DUNCAN / SIWARD ...................... Tom Mannion
MACBETH ............................. Michael Nardone
WITCH / BOY ......................... Evelyn Roberts
LENNOX ................................ James Robinson
BANQUO ................................ Patrick Robinson
ENSEMBLE ............................ Duncan Ross
ROSS .................................. Rachel Sanders
WITCH / GENTLEWOMAN ............ Olivia Sweeney
MACDUFF ............................ Ross Waiton
PORTER ............................... Deka Walmsley
LADY MACDUFF ....................... Lisa Zahra

Understudies

LADY MACDUFF ....................... Elizabeth Chan
WITCHES ............................. Nisa Cole
BANQUO ............................... Reuben Johnson
ROSS/DOCTOR .................... Helen Katamba
MALCOLM/MACDUFF .............. Brad Morrison
LENNOX/MURDERERS ............. Hauk Pattison
DUNCAN/SIWARD/PORTER/MURDERER .... Duncan Ross
FLEANCE/GENTLEWOMAN ....... Evelyn Roberts
MACBETH .......................... James Robinson
BOY .................................. Olivia Sweeney

DIRECTOR ........................... Rufus Norris
SET DESIGNER ...................... Rae Smith
COSTUME DESIGNER ............. Moritz Junge
TOUR LIGHTING DESIGNER .... Paul Pyant
COMPOSER .......................... Orlando Gough
COMPOSER / MUSIC DIRECTOR .... Marc Tritschler
SOUND DESIGNER ............... Paul Arditti
TOUR MOVEMENT DIRECTOR .... Cydney Uffindell-Phillips
ORIGINAL MOVEMENT DIRECTOR . Imogen Knight

ASSOCIATE DIRECTOR ........ Liz Stevenson
ASSOCIATE SET DESIGNER ...... Aaron Marsden
ASSOCIATE TOUR LIGHTING DESIGNER .... Ed Locke
ASSOCIATE SOUND DESIGNER .... Mike Winship
FIGHT DIRECTOR .................. Kev McCurdy
ORIGINAL INSTRUMENT MAKER, SONIC BRICOLAGE ............... Simon Allen
COMPANY VOICE WORK ........ Jeannette Nelson and Stevie Rickard
CASTING DIRECTOR ............. Sam Stevenson CDG
ASSISTANT DIRECTOR ........... Fay Lomas
POLE & MOVEMENT CAPTAIN .... Hauk Pattison
TEXT ARRANGEMENTS AND EDITS .... Paul Prescott

Opening
UK tour opened at The Lowry, Salford, on 29 September 2018.

This version of Macbeth opened at the National Theatre's Olivier Theatre, 6 March 2018.

Setting
Now, after a civil war

Length
2 hours 45 minutes, including a 20-minute interval

NB This time is approximate. Please speak to theatre staff for accurate timing.