



Cutting Text: How To's

Cutting Shakespeare's scripts is common practice in staging and filming his plays, and has been ever since Shakespeare's time. The work on Chicago Shakespeare Theater's stages is no exception: cutting the text (even for our "full-length" productions) is one of the first steps in any director's process—and it's always done to support their interpretation.

CST's Education team believes that many practices of theater can be readily "borrowed" and put to good use in an English classroom!

- ▶ You can use the guidelines below to cut a Shakespearean scene or passage to suit the needs of the learners in your classroom.
- ▶ You might also challenge your students to cut a text according to parameters that you provide (such as length, number of characters, or interpretative focus). After they're done cutting their scene, encourage students to discuss or write about the value of what they kept, their rationale for what they chose to cut, and the performance decisions that might be inspired by the cuts they made.

In cutting Shakespeare, you might cut...

- an entire scene (or scenes)
- an entire character (or characters) from the play or a particular passage. (And if you want to keep some lines from a character you've decided to cut, consider giving them to another character if you can imagine that other character saying those lines!)
- an entire chunk from a scene
- individual lines, or parts of lines, or even individual words



Reasons to cut...

- Increase clarity. If lots of archaic language is distracting the audience from an important point, you might cut the distracting parts and leave the most important message.
- Increase energy and audience engagement. Sometimes the audience gets *more* out of a show when there is *less* text!
- Spotlight your own interpretation or focus. As you're interpreting a Shakespearean character or story, you may selectively keep lines that contribute to the story that you want to tell and omit those that don't feel as relevant to your artistic vision.
- Respect time constraints. Whether on stage, on the silver screen, or in a classroom, we have to take practical time limits into account.

Good candidates for CUTTING:

- repeated information or ideas
- extraneous information
- archaic, out-of-use words
- obtuse references
- convoluted phrasing or inverted syntax (keeping enough to challenge your students at their reading level)
- anything where you think, **"The story makes sense without this."**

Good candidates for KEEPING:

- action and ideas that forward the plot
- familiar and famous lines
- words that preserve the meter (whenever possible)
- lines that provide equity in length among students' roles
- anything where you think, **"The story needs this to make sense."**



A few annotated examples

These annotated examples are simply that: examples. Every single cut represents a choice—neither “right” nor “wrong.” In the right-hand column, we’ve tried to make our thought process transparent. As you’re cutting, be brave! In performance, Shakespeare’s script is almost always cut.

Example 1, *Romeo and Juliet*, Act 1, scene 5

TYBALT
This, by his voice, should be a Montague.
Fetch me my rapier, boy. ~~What dares the slave~~
~~Come hither, cover'd with an antic face,~~
~~To flear and scorn at our solemnity?~~
Now, by the stock and honor of my kin,
To strike him dead, I hold it not a sin.

Here, we cut the text by approximately 50%. Tybalt, as we know, “goes on”—a lot! So, you can still communicate who the character is with fewer examples of his outbursts.

With this cut, we interrupted the meter, but chose to do it here because the command “Fetch me my rapier, boy” stands on its own.

Example 2, more *Romeo and Juliet*, Act 1, scene 5

CAPULET
Content thee, gentle coz, let him alone;
He bears him like a portly gentleman;
And, to say truth, Verona brags of him
To be a virtuous and well-govern'd youth:
I would not for the wealth of all the town
Here in my house do him disparagement:
Therefore be patient, take no note of him:
It is my will, the which if thou respect,
Show a fair presence and put off these frowns,
And ill-beseeming semblance for a feast.

Here is an example of cutting a bit of archaic language: “portly” now means something quite different from Capulet’s intent!

This is a debatable cut, we know. It cuts information that might be useful for an audience getting to know Romeo more “objectively”—from other townspeople’s points of view.

Here again, we break the meter by ending with the midstop “It is my will.” And you could certainly make an argument for cutting those four syllables, as well, and ending his speech with the previous line. But that four-syllable, monosyllabic line says so much about Capulet’s status, so we made an interpretive choice to leave it in, even though it breaks up the meter.



Example 3, *Macbeth*, Act 3, scene 1

MACBETH

To be thus is nothing;

But to be safely thus. Our fears in Banquo

Stick deep, and in his royalty of nature

Reigns that which would be feared. ~~'Tis much he dares,~~

~~And to that dauntless temper of his mind,~~

~~He hath a wisdom that doth guide his valor~~

~~To act in safety. There is none but he,~~

~~Whose being I do fear; and under him~~

~~My genius is rebuked, as it is said~~

~~Mark Antony's was by Caesar. He chid the sisters~~

~~When first they put the name of king upon me~~

~~And bade them speak to him. Then prophet-like~~

~~They hailed him father to a line of kings.~~

Upon my head they placed a fruitless crown

And put a barren sceptre in my gripe,

Thence to be wrenched with an unlineal hand,

No son of mine succeeding. If 't be so,

For Banquo's issue have I filed my mind;

For them, the gracious Duncan have I murdered,

~~Put rancors in the vessel of my peace~~

~~Only for them, and mine eternal jewel~~

~~Given to the common enemy of man,~~

To make them kings, the seed of Banquo kings.

~~Rather than so, come Fate into the list,~~

~~And champion me to th'utterance. Who's there?~~

Here, we've cut approximately 40% of the original.

Here's an example of a cut ("Reigns that which would be feared. There is none but he.") that ALMOST maintains the meter. This is now an 11-syllable line, which is not at all unusual. And all one would need to do to keep it a perfect iambic pentameter line would be to contract "There is" to "There's"—which Shakespeare does throughout his verse.

There are multiple possibilities for where you could start cutting here. You could keep "and under him, / My genius is rebuked" and then start your cut with the allusion to Mark Antony.

This cut is an example of an obscure allusion (unless, of course, you've already studied *Julius Caesar!*).

This one hurts because it's such beautiful imagery. But if you're trying to get the meaning of this speech across, it's not imperative. Another judgment call...

We cut these two lines because we liked the clarity of ending this speech with the line, "To make them kings, the seed of Banquo kings"—at the heart of Macbeth's speech here. BUT...if your interpretation focused on "Fate versus Free Will," you might not want to cut the reference to Fate here.



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