Daily Bard

TOOLKIT

The Shakespeare essay planner

Ten minutes of planning is worth a page of writing. This sheet takes you from the question to a thesis, then to paragraphs that analyse instead of retelling.

USE IT FOR	WORKS WITH	TIME
Timed essays, coursework drafts, exam practice	Any play or poem, any exam board	10 minutes to plan, then write

1. Read the question properly

Most weak essays answer a question that was not asked. Before you plan anything, underline three things in the question: the **command** (what you must do), the **focus** (the character, theme or idea), and the **scope** (an extract, the whole text, or both).

IF THE QUESTION SAYS	IT WANTS YOU TO
How does Shakespeare present …	Analyse methods: language, form, structure, staging. The word "how" is about craft, not plot.
How far do you agree …	Take a position, test it against the other side, and reach a judgement.
Explore the significance of …	Say what the thing does in the play: for meaning, for structure, for the audience.
Starting with this extract …	Analyse the extract closely, then range across the rest of the play.
Compare …	Organise by idea, not by text. Every paragraph should handle both texts.

Write the question's key words here, in your own words:

2. Build a thesis

A thesis is a claim someone could disagree with. It names what Shakespeare does and why it matters. A useful frame is: *Although [the obvious reading], Shakespeare [does something more interesting] in order to [effect on meaning or audience].*

WEAK	STRONGER
Macbeth is an ambitious character who kills the king.	Although Macbeth blames the witches and his wife, Shakespeare gives him the play's clearest account of why the murder is wrong, so that his ambition reads as a choice and not a spell.
Romeo and Juliet is about love and hate.	Shakespeare makes love and violence speak the same language, so that the lovers' haste looks less like an escape from the feud than another version of it.

My thesis:

3. Plan the paragraphs

Plan three or four paragraphs. Each one makes a single step in your argument and proves it from the text. Order them so the argument develops: do not simply follow the plot.

PARAGRAPH	POINT (ONE STEP OF THE THESIS)	QUOTATION (SHORT)	METHOD AND EFFECT	CONTEXT OR ANOTHER READING
1				
2				
3				
4				

INSIDE A PARAGRAPH

Make the point. Embed a short quotation in your own sentence. Name the method and say what it does to meaning. Zoom in on one word. Widen out to the theme, the context or a different reading. End by linking back to the question's own words.

4. A worked example

Question: How does Shakespeare present ambition in *Macbeth*?

Thesis: Shakespeare presents ambition as something Macbeth understands perfectly and chooses anyway, which is what makes it tragic and not merely criminal.

One paragraph: From the start, Macbeth's ambition is bound up with concealment. Hearing that Malcolm is heir, he commands, *"Stars, hide your fires; / Let not light see my black and deep desires."* The imperative addressed to the heavens shows a man who already knows his wish cannot bear to be seen, and the rhyme of "fires" and "desires" gives the couplet the click of a decision. Light in the play stands for moral order as well as sight, so in asking for darkness Macbeth asks to be hidden from judgement and from himself. He later admits he has *"no spur / To prick the sides of my intent, but only / Vaulting ambition"*: the riding metaphor imagines ambition overleaping and falling. Shakespeare therefore lets Macbeth diagnose his own flaw before he acts on it. The full argument is in the Macbeth study guide.

5. Opening and closing

- **Introduction:** two or three sentences. Answer the question at once with your thesis. Do not retell the plot or give the author's biography.
- **Conclusion:** do not repeat the introduction. Say what your argument adds up to: what the play finally suggests about the question's focus, and how an audience is left.

6. Before you hand it in

- [ ] Every paragraph begins with a point about meaning, not an event in the plot.
- [ ] Every quotation is short, accurate and embedded in my own sentence.
- [ ] I name methods precisely and say what each one does.
- [ ] I write about Shakespeare making choices: "Shakespeare presents", "the verse breaks".
- [ ] Context appears only where it changes how a line reads.

- [ ] I have considered at least one other way of reading the evidence.
- [ ] My last sentence answers the question in its own words.

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