

# Shakespeare & the English Language FAQ

*Shakespeare is universal* Harold Bloom

## How did Shakespeare change the English language?

### Grammar/Rules of English .

Before Shakespeare the grammar and rules of English were not standardized. The popularity of his plays in the late 17th and 18th helped formalise the English language. He introduced new literary and poetical techniques like [blank verse](#)

### Vocabulary

Shakespearean introduced and/or popularized more vocabulary than any other writer. He is the most quoted writer in [Samuel Johnson's A Dictionary of the English Language](#). He greatly increased the number of words in common use.

"In all of his plays, sonnets and narrative poems – Shakespeare uses 17,677 words: Of those, 1,700 were first used by Shakespeare." [Warren King](#)

This was at a time when the average active vocabulary was less than 1,000.

## Did Shakespeare invent all these new words?

It is difficult to know whether Shakespeare invented all these new words. One Shakespearean thinks not: "the Victorian scholars who read texts for the first edition of the OED paid special attention to Shakespeare: [H]is texts were cited more often, so he is often credited with the first use of words which can, in fact, be found in other writers."

### Which words do we think he created?

A very large number. They include *accommodation, aerial, amazement, apostrophe, assassination, auspicious, baseless, bloody, bump, castigate, control, countless, courtship, critic, critical, dishearten, dislocate, dwindle, exposure, frugal, generous, gloomy, hurry, laughable*

### How did he do it?

- Shakespeare expanded our vocabulary by approaching it in a new way. This involved "changing nouns into verbs, changing verbs into adjectives, connecting words never before used together, adding prefixes and suffixes, and devising words wholly original."

He also used unexpected word combinations: *arch-villain, well-bred*

## What are his most famous phrases?

They are too numerous to list. Here is a very short list:

- *star crossed lovers* - Romeo and Juliet,
- *sound and fury* - Macbeth
- *salad days* - Anthony and Cleopatra
- *neither a borrower nor a lender be* - Hamlet
- *brave new world* - The Tempest
- *a foregone conclusion* - Othello
- *a sorry sight* - Macbeth
- *all corners of the world* - Cymbeline
- *all well that ends well* - Alls Well That Ends Well.

## Which phrases are falsely attributed to Shakespeare?

Some surprising ones for reasons cited above. They include: *It's Greek to me, The naked truth, To play fast and loose, Till the last gasp, Laughing stock, Fools paradise*

### More about the English Language