

William Shakespeare

and Choosing the Right Word

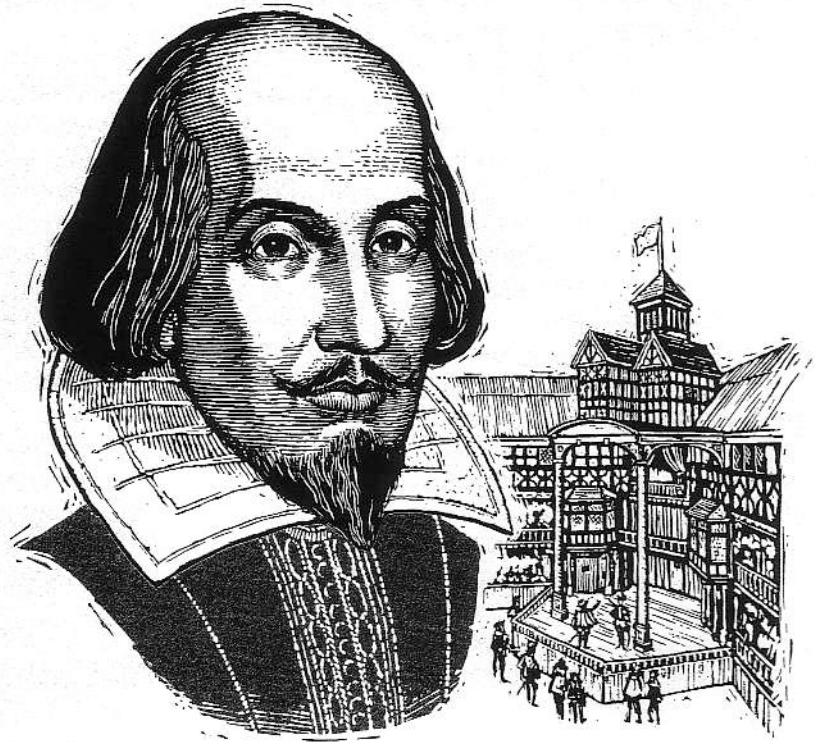
by Robert S. Boone

Writers are not doughnut machines. They do not turn out words ready-made for consumption. All successful writers evaluate words after they reach the first-draft paper. Does this word mean exactly what I intend? Is it the right size? Shape? Do I need to repeat it? Do I need to find a substitute? Do I need it at all? Instead of doughnut machines, writers are appraisers of jewels.

It helps us as writers to observe others who have evaluated shrewdly. So, why not start with William Shakespeare, who is writing to you in *your* language, solving the same problems you face in *your own* writing. True, he invented some words—he brought *emulate*, *fitful*, and *obscene* into the English language, for example—but his great skill was in using words that were already around.

“I only speak right on”: Keep It Simple

Many of the words Shakespeare uses are very small. To those expecting gigantic hunks of verbiage, this will come as a delightful surprise. It is even more surprising that he often reserves his smallest words for his biggest ideas, almost as if he does not want the reader to be distracted by his language. Consider his most famous line of all. After experiencing a series of shocks, young Prince Hamlet asks just about the biggest question anyone can ask: should I keep on living or should I commit suicide? But here's how he asks it:



To be, or not to be:
That is the question...

Could anything be simpler? Not only are the words simple; they are not complicated by any figures of speech. They say exactly what they mean—but what they mean is profound.

In Shakespeare's sonnets, we often find equally spare language carrying equally heavy loads. In Sonnet 73, for instance, Shakespeare expresses one of the great paradoxes of love. The sonnet begins with the speaker telling his beloved that he is getting old. He is like a tree in the winter; he's like the end of the day "after the sunset fadeth in the west"; he is like the ashes of a once-glowing fire. But the less time that remains, the more love he feels. Notice how simple the language is as

Shakespeare states this idea in the final couplet. Get past the old-fashioned diction—"perceivest" for "perceives," "thou" and "thy" for "you" and "your," "ere" for "before"—and the meaning is clear.

This thou perceivest, which makes thy love more strong,
To love that well which thou must leave ere long.

Search through the great Shakespeare speeches, and you'll be astonished at the simplicity of his word choice.

To thine own self be true. (*Hamlet*)
Something is rotten in the state of Denmark. (*Hamlet*)

What a piece of work is a man!
(*Hamlet*)

A horse! A horse! My kingdom for a horse! (*Richard III*)

Good night! Good night! Parting is such sweet sorrow... (*Romeo and Juliet*)

What's in a name? That which we

call a rose
 By any other word would smell as
 sweet. (*Romeo and Juliet*)
 But love is blind, and lovers can-
 not see. (*The Merchant of Ven-
 ice*)
 The better part of valor is discre-
 tion. (*Henry IV, Part I*)
 All the world's a stage
 And all the men and women
 merely players...(*As You Like It*)
 Friends, Romans, countrymen,
 lend me your ears. (*Julius Cae-
 sar*)
 Lord, what fools these mortals be!
 (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*)

**“O, wonderful, wonderful
 and most wonderful,
 wonderful”:
 Repeat Yourself**

In spite of the popularity of *Ro-
 get's Thesaurus* and other synonym
 dictionaries, remember the value of
 the repeated word in certain situa-
 tions. Repeated words reinforce an
 idea. Repeated words create a
 rhythm. What if, instead of repeating
 “I have a dream,” Martin Luther
 King, Jr., had substituted “I have this

notion,” “I am mulling over this
 idea,” and “Here's my latest
 thought”?

And what if Shakespeare had had
 Hamlet say, “To be or not to exist”?
 What if he had tinkered with the lan-
 guage of Mark Antony's funeral ora-
 tion in *Julius Caesar*? In this speech,
 while seeming to side with “honor-
 able” Brutus and the others who
 killed Julius Caesar, Antony subtly
 sways the audience in the other di-
 rection by showing that Caesar was
 not the ambitious leader the assas-
 sins claimed he was. Throughout
 the speech, he repeats.

For Brutus is an honorable man;
 So are they all, all honorable men;

But Brutus says he was ambi-
 tious;
 And Brutus is an honorable man.

Yet Brutus says he was ambitious;
 And Brutus is an honorable man.

I should do Brutus wrong, and
 Cassius wrong,
 Who, you all know, are honorable
 men.

Like any politician or advertising
 executive, Antony knows both nega-

tive psychology and the power of the
 repeated word. What better way to
 convey an idea than to say it over
 and over and over again?

In a letter to Ophelia, Hamlet has
 a different audience but a similar de-
 sire to communicate his deepest
 feelings:

Doubt thou the stars are fire;
 Doubt that the sun doth move;
 Doubt truth to be a liar;
 But never doubt I love.

When he talks to himself right be-
 fore murdering King Duncan, Mac-
 beth repeats the words that won't
 leave his mind. He wants nothing
 more than to have the whole thing
 be over:

If it were done tis done, then were
 well
 It were done quickly.

**“Very like a whale”:
 Create Specific Images**

When the occasion calls for it,
 Shakespeare can bring out the po-
 etic big guns. He fashions similes,
 metaphors, personifications, and
 other figures of speech. He employs
 alliteration, assonance, onomato-
 poeia, and other sound devices. He
 appeals to our eyes, ears, tongue,
 fingers, and nose. He uses these de-
 vices when he wants us to contem-
 plate something specific, even if this
 specific image eventually leads to
 our considering something much
 more general.

Near the end of the play, Macbeth
 faces certain death that he brought
 on himself. He sees life—his and
 others'—as a thoroughly depress-
 ing business. But instead of saying,
 “Boy, is life a purposeless event;
 what's all the fuss?” he expresses
 his view through several specific im-
 ages.

Out, out, brief candle!
 Life's but a walking shadow, a
 poor player
 That struts and frets his hour upon
 the stage
 And then is heard no more. It is a
 tale



Photo: Courtesy Warner Brothers

Told by an idiot, full of sound and
fury
Signifying nothing.

Life is both a "candle" and a
"walking shadow"—two things we
can perceive. Notice the alliteration
in "poor player." Notice the vivid-
ness of the verbs "strut" and "fret."
Notice the image of the "tale told by
an idiot."

Before he delivers his funeral ora-
tion, Mark Antony must pretend to
Brutus, Cassius, and the other con-
spirators that he approves of Cae-
sar's assassination. To do otherwise
would be to invite death. Left alone,
however, he expresses his anguish.
Instead of talking to no one in partic-
ular, he talks to the dead Caesar in
words that force us to gaze on a
strong, single image. Instead of say-
ing "O, Caesar," he refers to him as a
"bleeding piece of earth." This he
follows with specific words and fig-
ures of speech—all combining to
help us appreciate even more
deeply the love Antony has for the
murdered Caesar:

O! pardon me, thou bleeding
piece of earth,
That I am meek and gentle with
these butchers!
Thou art the ruins of the noblest
man
That ever lived in the tide of
times.

Now we know for certain how An-
tony really feels about Caesar and
those who killed him.

"Words, words, words": Using Some Big Ones

Of course, Shakespeare uses big
words too. It's hard to read him with-
out a dictionary nearby. You could
spend many weeks just compiling
SAT-sized words that you learned
reading *Othello*: perdition; rumin-
ate; filches; cuckold; mandragora; be-
guiled; alabaster; Promethean; rep-
robation; extenuate; malice; malign-
ant; cashiered; imminent; quirks;
beguile; propriety; potatoes; impo-
sition; clamor; haggard; denoted.

Shakespeare is not just showing
off, however. When he chooses a
big word, it's because of its meaning
or because of what it tells us about
its speaker. At the very end of the



play, Othello, falsely believing his
wife has been unfaithful, decides he
must kill her. This decision made, he
mulls the fact that this is one choice
he cannot go back on. Once done,
that's it:

I know not where is that Pro-
methean heat
That can thy light relume.

In Greek mythology, Prometheus
angered the gods by bringing fire to
man. *Promethean* has come to
mean not just light- or fire- but life-
giving. A word of this size and gran-
deur is certainly appropriate to the
tragedy about to unfold. *Relume* is
an old word we probably wouldn't
use, but clearly it means "to light
again," to re-illuminate. It too seems
to fit.

Our admiration for Shakespeare's
skill with words grows even more
when we remember that in choosing
them, he also had to consider their
size and their shape to fit the poetic
form. And, like all playwrights, he
had to be conscious of the character
of the speaker using the words. As
long as we read Shakespeare, we
never run out of useful verbal
models for our own writing. □

Write Away

I. Here's a chance to react to the big
words from *Othello*. In answering the
questions, repeat the words several
times.

- Was anything ever *filched* from
you?
- Who is the most *beguiling* charac-
ter on TV?
- Were you ever punished unfairly
because *extenuating* circumstances
were not considered?
- When have you looked the most
haggard?
- Have you ever treated someone
with *malice*?
- What's the most *clamor* you have
ever experienced?

II. Write a statement that you be-
lieve about each of these subjects.
Then try to express it as a figure of
speech (Remember Shakespeare's
use of the "poor player" to express
Macbeth's view of life): school; poli-
tics; family relations; siblings; adver-
tising.

III. Experiment with repetition. Re-
member a time when you were
bored? Write about it, repeating
"bored" and its other forms as much
as possible.