

Hamlet – with a Whoosh!

Instructions: Together we are going to create a compacted performance of “Hamlet” by William Shakespeare. I shall narrate the story and every time a character appears, I will invite someone into the circle and they must act out what that character says and does: The more enthusiastically, the better. I will also need others to create props and scenery and the whole class will provide sound effects.

For our play to be successful, everyone must listen in to what is being said, and watch closely.

The most important rule of a whoosh is this: Whenever I say WHOOSH! Everyone must say WHOOSH! and clear the stage and return to their seat in the circle. Let’s practise that...

King Hamlet was a noble, wise, kind king, but... he is dead. (Don’t worry; he’s not the Hamlet from the title. That’s his son. We’ll meet him in a bit.) **King Hamlet’s** brother **Claudius** secretly poisoned him. **Claudius** then took the crown and throne of Denmark and married King Hamlet’s wife **Queen Gertrude**.

The play begins with a celebration of **Claudius** and **Gertrude’s** marriage

[What do we need for a celebration? What might we see? What might we hear?]

The celebration is attended by many Danish nobles, including **Polonius** and **Prince Hamlet**. (That’s the one from the title. He’s the son of King Hamlet and Gertrude.) **Prince Hamlet** is grieving for his father’s death, and is very unhappy about his mother so suddenly marrying his uncle! He is disgusted by the disloyalty and disrespect.

(1) **Prince Hamlet**: “But two months dead! Frailty, thy name is woman!”

WHOOSH!

We also meet **Polonius**, an advisor to Claudius, a proud, pompous, doddery old man, and his son **Laertes**. He’s pretty handsome, intelligent and dashing – a good rival for Prince Hamlet. **Laertes** has come back to Denmark for the funeral and wedding, but now asks permission to return to France. (At this point he might seem like a bit of a

random side plot, but just you wait – it's when he comes back that it gets good!) His father **Polonius** and **King Claudius** give him permission to leave, and we don't see Laertes again until Act 4. *(And there are stories about actors playing Laertes literally going home for a couple of hours in the middle of the performance. That's how long he's gone!)*

But before he goes, **Laertes** stops to say goodbye to his sister **Ophelia** and give her some advice. **Ophelia** has been flirting with Prince Hamlet, and she definitely fancies him. **Laertes** warns her not to be ensnared by the Prince, who is likely to break her heart.

(2) **Laertes**: Keep you in the rear of your affection, out of the shot and danger of desire.

Polonius joins in too, insisting that **Ophelia** reject Hamlet's affections and delivers a speech of long, rambling, self-important advice for both his children.

(3) **Polonius**: Neither a borrower nor a lender be;
For loan oft loses both itself and friend,
And borrowing dulls the edge of husbandry.

WHOOSH!

[Next, we're out on the ramparts of the castle, on a stormy night. I need some wind! Maybe some thunder? What else might we hear at night?]

Meanwhile, back at the palace, **Prince Hamlet** is met by his close friend **Horatio** and two guards: **Bernardo** and **Marcellus**. They tell the prince that they've seen a ghost walking on the battlements and it looked just like his dead father **King Hamlet**. They take him that evening to see for himself and indeed the ghost of **King Hamlet** appears and tells Prince Hamlet the truth about his murder and gives him a task:

(4) **King Hamlet**: If thou didst ever thy dear father love-
Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder.

Prince Hamlet makes his friends swear not to tell what they have seen, and begins to frantically think about how to avenge his father's murder.

WHOOSH!

Some time passes and next we see **Polonius** again. His daughter **Ophelia** reports that she has seen **Prince Hamlet** again and he acted very strangely, he looked pale, his knees were knocking and he stared at her face. Like her father told her, she tried to keep away from Hamlet and reject his advances.

(5) **Ophelia**: As you did command, I did repel his letters and denied his access to me.

Polonius believes Hamlet has been driven mad by **Ophelia** rejecting his love, and he feels responsible for telling her to do this. **Polonius** reports Hamlet's madness to King **Claudius** and they plan to spy on Hamlet and Ophelia together and work out if he is really love-sick. And what do they see?

Prince Hamlet is horrible to **Ophelia**. He tells her he never really loved her, that she is a ruined woman and a temptress. It is implied that he's taken more than just her heart from her, and he repeated yells at her:

(6) **Prince Hamlet**: Get thee to a nunnery!

WHOOSH!

Prince Hamlet is struggling to work out how to avenge his father's murder. He hates his uncle Claudius, but he doesn't want to hurt his mother Gertrude in the process. He feels like a failure and a traitor to his father for not doing something strong and violent to avenge him. Then, he meets a group of travelling **Players** arriving in town and has an idea! He hires the players to perform a play and will add in a section which re-enacts his father's murder, to see how Claudius reacts.

(7) **Prince Hamlet**: The play's the thing wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king.

So, all the courtiers of the palace assemble to see the players' performance.

Claudius, Gertrude, Polonius, Ophelia, Horatio and more. The **Players** begin performing a traditional love story and **Prince Hamlet** talks through the whole thing, excited to see the effect of his editing. When the **Players** reach the part Hamlet has added, the **Player King** is kneeling to pray in the garden, the **Player Brother** goes to pour poison in his ear and ... **Claudius** throws a tantrum, stops the play and storms out, followed by **Polonius, Gertrude and Ophelia**.

Hamlet excitedly tells **Horatio** this is the proof he needed! **Claudius** must have a guilty conscience.

WHOOSH!

Claudius is furious, but **Polonius** has another plan. He thinks **Queen Gertrude** should try talking to her son, and **Polonius** will hide behind a tapestry to listen. And what do they see?

(8) **Queen Gertrude**: Hamlet thou hast thy father much offended.

(9) **Prince Hamlet**: Mother, you have my father much offended.

Prince Hamlet is horrible to his mother, telling her how he is disgusted with what she has done and violently forcing her to look at herself in the mirror. Then he hears **Polonius** behind the tapestry, thinks it must be Claudius and stabs him!

WHOOSH!

Claudius is even more furious! He decides that Prince Hamlet must be sent abroad for the safety of the nation... but mostly for Claudius' own protection. He recruits two of Prince Hamlet's school friends to escort him, **Rosencrantz and Guildenstern**. These two are a bit of a comedy double act – posh, private school types, but not very good at their job of minding Hamlet. **Claudius** gives them a sealed letter to deliver when they arrive in England. Inside are secret instructions.

(10) **Claudius**: The present death of Hamlet: Do it, England!

[We're off sailing on a ship. Who's going to be our captain? What else do we need to set the scene on our ship to England?]

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are very pally with **Prince Hamlet**, but doesn't trust them and sees straight through it. On the ship to England, **Hamlet** sneaks in and finds the letter Claudius gave them. He is shocked to discover it has instructions for allies in England to execute Hamlet! So, Hamlet re-writes the letter with new instructions. When they arrive in England and **Rosencrantz and Guildenstern** deliver the letter, but now it contains instructions for them to be executed instead! And thus, **Rosencrantz and Guildenstern** are dead! And **Hamlet** secretly sneaks his way back to Denmark for revenge!

WHOOSH!

Poor **Ophelia** has had a pretty tough time in this play. She's been wooed and rejected by Hamlet, verbally abused, and now her father has been murdered. She's been driven properly mad. She daydreams and sings and recites odd little poems while picking wildflowers, and eventually drowns herself.

Laertes has also arrived back in Denmark and he is furious. More furious than Claudius was. Even more furious than that. He's furious about his father's death. And he's even more furious when he finds out about his sister's madness and drowning. **Laertes** thinks **Claudius** is responsible and is ready to start a revolution.

(11) **Laertes:** To hell, allegiance! I'll be revenged most thoroughly for my father.

However, **Claudius** is very sly and manipulative. **Claudius** convinces **Laertes** that Prince Hamlet is the one who deserves his revenge and plots with him to poison Hamlet.

WHOOSH!

Prince Hamlet has arrived back in Denmark too and is walking through a graveyard with **Horatio** when they encounter a **Gravedigger**. Together, **Hamlet** and the **Gravedigger** laugh and joke about life and death and Hamlet even finds the skull of a jester he knew when he was little.

(12) **Prince Hamlet:** Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio. A man of infinite jest.

Also in the graveyard, **Hamlet** encounters a funeral procession and realises it is **Ophelia's** funeral. He is upset to hear about her death, but so is **Laertes**. **Hamlet and Laertes** argue over who loved her more and who is more sad about her death, and **Laertes** tries to strangle **Hamlet**!

WHOOSH!

The final climax of the play is a duel. **Hamlet** is told that a duel has been arranged between him and Laertes, and Claudius has put on a big bet that Hamlet will win. Hamlet accepts the challenge, but doesn't know what is really going on.

Laertes has poisoned his sword, so that if he can cut Hamlet's skin, it will poison and kill him. As a backup plan, **Claudius** has also poisoned a chalice, which he will give to Hamlet to drink if the sword plan fails.

The duel begins, and **Hamlet** is winning. **Laertes** can't get in a hit, so he becomes frustrated and cheats by attacking Hamlet when his back is turned. In the struggle, they swap swords and both end up cut by the poisoned sword.

What's worse – **Queen Gertrude** has drunk from the poisoned chalice.

In his dying words, **Laertes** tells **Hamlet** the truth and reveals **Claudius'** manipulation. **Prince Hamlet** takes the poisoned chalice and forces the poison on Claudius, killing him in much the same way as Claudius killed his father.

WHOOSH!

And so, the tragedy of Hamlet, prince of Denmark, ends like this.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern ... are dead.

King Hamlet ... was dead all along.

Polonius was stabbed through the arras... and is dead.

Ophelia was driven mad and drowned... so she's dead.

Queen Gertrude drank from the poisoned chalice... and is also dead.

King Claudius eventually got his just deserts ... so he's dead.

And **Laertes** and **Prince Hamlet** were both cut by the poisoned sword and ...are dead.

And **Horatio**... well, Horatio is still alive! He holds his dying friend Hamlet and says:

(13) **Horatio**: Now cracks a noble heart. Good night, sweet prince,
And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!

All together, one last time: WHOOSH!

1 Prince Hamlet: “But two months dead!
Frailty, thy name is woman!”

2 Laertes: Keep you in the rear of your affection,
out of the shot and danger of desire.

3 Polonius: Neither a borrower nor a lender be;
For loan oft loses both itself and friend,
And borrowing dulls the edge of husbandry.

4 King Hamlet: If thou didst ever thy dear father
love
Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder.

5 Ophelia: As you did command, I did repel his
letters and denied his access to me.

6 Prince Hamlet: Get thee to a nunnery!

7 Prince Hamlet: The play’s the thing wherein I’ll
catch the conscience of the king.

8 Queen Gertrude: Hamlet thou hast thy father much offended.

9 Prince Hamlet: Mother, you have my father much offended.

10 Claudius: The present death of Hamlet: Do it, England!

11 Laertes: To hell, allegiance! I'll be revenged most thoroughly for my father.

12 Prince Hamlet: Alas, poor Yorick! I knew him, Horatio. A man of infinite jest.

13 Horatio: Now cracks a noble heart. Good night, sweet prince,
And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!

King Hamlet	Prince Hamlet	Marcellus
(King) Claudius	Horatio	Polonius
Ophelia	Laertes	Bernardo
Queen Gertrude	Player King	Guildenstern
Grave digger	Player Brother	Rosencrantz