



# How to Teach Your Children Shakespeare

By Ken Ludwig

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## How to Teach Your Children Shakespeare By Ken Ludwig

### A foolproof, enormously fun method of teaching your children the classic works of William Shakespeare

To know some Shakespeare provides a head start in life. His plays are among the great bedrocks of Western civilization and contain the finest writing of the past 450 years. Many of the best novels, plays, poems, and films in the English language produced since Shakespeare's death in 1616—from *Pride and Prejudice* to *The Godfather*—are heavily influenced by Shakespeare's stories, characters, language, and themes. In *How to Teach Your Children Shakespeare*, acclaimed playwright Ken Ludwig provides the tools you need to inspire an understanding, and a love, of Shakespeare's works in your children, and to have fun together along the way.

Ken Ludwig devised his friendly, easy-to-master methods while teaching his own children. Beginning with memorizing short passages from the plays, his technique then instills children with cultural references they will utilize for years to come. Ludwig's approach includes understanding of the time period and implications of Shakespeare's diction as well as the invaluable lessons behind his words and stories. Colorfully incorporating the history of Shakespearean theater and society, *How to Teach Your Children Shakespeare* guides readers on an informed and adventurous journey through the world in which the Bard wrote.

This book's simple process allows anyone to impart to children the wisdom of plays like *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Twelfth Night*, *Macbeth*, and *Romeo and Juliet*. And there's fun to be had throughout. Shakespeare novices and experts and readers of all ages will each find something delightfully irresistible in *How to Teach Your Children Shakespeare*.

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## How to Teach Your Children Shakespeare By Ken Ludwig Bibliography

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## Editorial Review

### Review

“Ken Ludwig's enthusiasm for Shakespeare and his lucid, accessible and inspiring book on *How To Teach Your Children Shakespeare* is a rare treat. You and your children will be transformed into the magic and mystery of Shakespeare and his stories in an instant. I highly recommend the book to all who have a love of language and history.” —**Sir Derek Jacobi, CBE**

“*How to Teach Your Children Shakespeare* is an inspired and inspiring book. It's also a deeply rewarding one that will bring a great deal of pleasure to many parents and children. Ken Ludwig, a wonderful playwright, proves to be a superb guide to Shakespeare as well.” —**James Shapiro, author of *A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare and Contested Will***

“I wish someone had given this book to my parents. It would have made a life-changing task downright fun. Ken Ludwig is a smart, congenial and inventive guide, and everywhere in this remarkable book he takes the strangeness out of Shakespeare's work and leaves the enchanting mystery. A book for all lovers, and potential lovers, of Shakespeare. Like nothing else, it creates a magical home theater for parents and their children.” —**J. D. McClatchy, Yale University**

“I have been in [Ken's] home. His children really do know Shakespeare. Read the book and you'll see why. It's scholarship dancing around with fun.” —**Hal Holbrook**

“Don't be fooled by the title. This book is for anyone who wants to brush up on Shakespeare... Don't buy this book to teach your children; take them along as you commit these beautiful speeches to memory.” —**Kirkus Reviews**

“[Ludwig's] enthusiasm is also infectious . . . it's hard to come away from this book without wanting to find someone, child or adult, to convert.” —**Cleveland Plain Dealer**

### About the Author

**KEN LUDWIG** is an internationally acclaimed playwright who has had numerous hits on Broadway, in London, and throughout the world. His plays and musicals include *Lend Me a Tenor*, which won two Tony Awards, and *Crazy for You*, which won the Tony Award for Best Musical. He has also won two Laurence Olivier Awards and the Edgar Award from the Mystery Writers of America. His work has been commissioned by the Royal Shakespeare Company, and has been performed in over thirty countries in more than twenty languages. Visit him at [www.kenludwig.com](http://www.kenludwig.com).

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chapter 1

### Passage 1 Learning the First Line

I know a bank where the wild thyme blows

Nine words. Each word has one syllable. Nine syllables.

That's all it is.

It isn't hard to learn this line of poetry. It's from the play *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by William Shakespeare, and I'll bet your son or daughter can memorize it in less than a minute.

There are two keys to memorizing it:

First, say it aloud.

Second, repeat it.

So let's do it together: Say this aloud:

I know a bank

Now say it again:

I know a bank

Now say it four times in a row. No kidding. Just do it—and promise me that you'll do it aloud:

I know a bank

I know a bank

I know a bank

I know a bank

Did you say it aloud? Because if you didn't, this won't work, I assure you. In order to do it properly, you have to go to a place where you won't be embarrassed. Just pick a room and close the door. Then sit down with your son or daughter and do it together. Say it aloud four times. If you've done this honestly, as I've described, you've now got it in your brain, and you'll never forget it.

I know a bank

Now do the same thing with the second half of the line. The words are more complex but not difficult at all. Have your child say them aloud:

where the wild thyme blows

Now say them again:

where the wild thyme blows

It's important when you learn Shakespeare that you understand every word you're reading or memorizing. Your children should understand that a bank is a mound of grass on the side of a stream or river, and that thyme is a flowering plant with a strong smell. It is less commonly known that blow in Shakespeare's day meant "burst into flower." So what the speaker is describing is a mound of grass, probably near a stream, where the wild thyme is blowing in the breeze and bursting into flower.

Now let's go back to the words. Say the second half of the line again, four times, out loud.

where the wild thyme blows

If you've said these words aloud, you and your child can now put the whole line together without difficulty. Do it. Say it aloud:

I know a bank where the wild thyme blows

Say it again, and really enjoy saying it, because it's good for the soul.

I know a bank where the wild thyme blows

One last time, and this time say it in a hushed tone, painting a picture with the words, describing a place of great beauty and depth:

I know a bank where the wild thyme blows

And now you and your child have memorized some Shakespeare. Believe me, it will stay with both of you for the rest of your lives. And it will change your lives.

chapter 2

The Reason for the Book

Let's pause for a moment so I can give you some background. When I'm finished, we'll dig right back into the first passage.

I've been teaching Shakespeare to my children since they were six years old. I'm a bit of a Shakespeare fanatic, and it occurred to me when my daughter was in first grade that if there was any skill—any single area of learning and culture—that I could impart to her while we were both healthy and happy and able to share things together in a calm, focused, pre-teen way, then Shakespeare was it.

I began the process by teaching her lines from my favorite Shakespeare comedies; and as I continued with this method and expanded it to include my son, I became convinced that the way into the subject—the way to introduce someone to Shakespeare for the first time so that it doesn't feel daunting and yet has real integrity—is to memorize it. First a few lines, then whole speeches.

With Shakespeare, memorizing is the key to everything.

A great deal of this book will involve memorizing speeches from Shakespeare's plays. Along the way we'll discuss other important aspects of Shakespeare—the stories, the verse, the imagery, the characters—everything that you and your children should know in order to understand how Shakespeare

changed the world.

Two good questions arise right away: Why Shakespeare? And why memorize it?

Why Shakespeare?

The answer to the first question is that Shakespeare isn't just one of the many great authors in the English language; Shakespeare is, indisputably, one of the two great bedrocks of Western civilization in English. (The other is the King James translation of the Bible.) Not only do Shakespeare's plays themselves contain the finest writing of the past 450 years, but most of the best novels, plays, poetry, and films in the English language produced since Shakespeare's death in 1616—from Jane Austen to Charles Dickens, from *Ulysses* to *The Godfather*—are heavily influenced by Shakespeare's stories, characters, language, and themes. As Falstaff says in *Henry IV, Part 2*:

I am not only witty in myself, but the cause that wit is in other men.

Shakespeare is not only creative in himself—he is the cause of creation in other writers.

For many of us, Shakespeare has become a kind of Bible for the modern world, bringing us together intellectually the way religious services have traditionally done. For more than five thousand years, Moses, Jesus, and the other towering figures of the Old and New Testaments were the archetypes of our consciousness. In modern society, Hamlet and Macbeth, Juliet and Ophelia, have been added to their number. To know some Shakespeare gives you a head start in life.

Also, Shakespeare's powers as a writer simply exceed those of every other writer in the history of the English language. Here is an excerpt from the diary of the distinguished English novelist and essayist Virginia Woolf, who speaks here for every writer I know:

I read Shakespeare directly after I have finished writing, when my mind is agape and red and hot. Then it is astonishing. I never yet knew how amazing his stretch and speed and word-coining power is, until I felt it utterly outpace and outrace my own, seeming to start equal and then I see him draw ahead and do things I could not in my wildest tumult and utmost press of mind imagine. [T]he words drop so fast one can't pick them up. Why then should anyone else attempt to write. This is not "writing" at all. Indeed, I could say that Shakespeare surpasses literature altogether, if I knew what I meant.

Why Memorize It?

As for memorization, I'm convinced that it unlocks the whole world of Shakespeare in a unique way. In order to memorize something, you have to be very specific and very honest with yourself. You have to work slowly, and you have to understand every word of what you're memorizing. There was a time not long ago when memorization was considered to be one of the basic tools of an academic education. Students were expected to learn hundreds of lines from the Greek and Roman classics, then, later, from poetry in their native tongues. This tradition has faded from our lives, and something powerful has been lost.

That said, Shakespeare can be difficult to read, let alone memorize, without some help. Most people who pick up one of Shakespeare's plays and try to read it for pleasure end up putting it down after the first few pages because they find it confusing. And this is true for adults, let alone children.

There are several reasons for this. First, many of Shakespeare's words are unfamiliar to us. When Hamlet, in

the most famous speech in the English language (To be or not to be), refers to something called a bodkin, most of us just scratch our heads and want to give up. (A bodkin is a dagger.)

Second, Shakespeare's sentence structure often sounds odd to our ears. This is partly because Shakespeare wrote his plays more than four hundred years ago and partly because a substantial portion of his plays are in poetry. Thus he's frequently saying things like Conceal me what I am instead of "Disguise me."

Third, Shakespeare frequently writes in metaphors. His mind was so lively and cunning, so profound and imaginative, that he was always telling us how something was like something else, and it often takes some effort to puzzle out his meaning. For example, in one of Shakespeare's most famous speeches from Romeo and Juliet, he has Romeo compare Juliet's eyes to stars in the night sky. He has Romeo say that the real stars have to hurry away, and they (the stars) have asked Juliet's eyes to take their place. Then Romeo adds that Juliet's eyes would—in place of the stars—shine so brightly that birds would start singing because they'd think it was daytime, not nighttime. Here's what he actually says:

Two of the fairest stars in all the heaven,

Having some business, do entreat her eyes

To twinkle in their spheres till they return.???.?

Her eye in heaven

Would through the airy regions stream so bright

That birds would sing and think it were not night.

This is obviously a complex piece of writing, yet my son won a recitation contest with this speech when he was eleven years old.

The point is that Shakespeare is like a foreign language. In order to learn it, we need to understand every word, then practice until we feel comfortable. If your children memorize one line at a time, then a short speech, then a longer speech, they'll become self-assured and then fluent. At that point, Shakespeare will become part of their literary vocabulary.

### The Value of Knowing Shakespeare

Knowing Shakespeare in depth has profound implications for your children. It means that they can begin to view life through a Shakespearean lens, using the questions that Shakespeare raises in his plays as a point of reference as they learn to form their own opinions. What does Twelfth Night tell us about the relationship between brothers and sisters? What does Hamlet tell us about the anxiety we feel when a parent dies?

In addition, Shakespeare articulates emotions that help children understand the stresses of their daily lives. When children hear Juliet say:

Give me my Romeo; and when I shall die

Take him and cut him out in little stars,

And he will make the face of heaven so fine

That all the world will be in love with night

or they hear Macbeth utter:

Life's but a walking shadow,???.?It is a tale

Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,

Signifying nothing.

they are likely to feel that thoughts of longing, death, and hopelessness are less alien to them.

From the beginning, I had a number of additional goals in mind in teaching my children Shakespeare. One was to give them the tools to read Shakespeare's works with intelligence for the rest of their lives. On the simplest level, this will enrich their lives and give them a lifetime of pleasure.

Another goal was to expose them to literature of such universal depth and worth that it would inspire them to want to achieve great things as they marched forward into maturity. I have staked my life as a writer on the proposition that the arts make a difference in how we see the world and how we conduct our lives—how we view charity to our neighbors and justice to our communities—and Shakespeare, as the greatest artist in the history of our civilization, has worlds to teach us as long as we have the tools we need to understand him.

From a very personal standpoint, the course of Shakespeare studies outlined in this book also provided me and my children with hundreds of hours of one-on-one time together that we never would have shared otherwise. These hours spent together have made our family stronger and more tolerant of one another.

On a practical note, I had another, very specific goal in mind: to teach my children at least twenty-five passages from Shakespeare's plays so that they could have the lines at their fingertips and spout them whenever the occasion presented itself. The occasion might be citing a literary reference in an English essay, or it might include making an intelligent point in conversation. These uses, frankly, open doors for our children, which is what we as parents are, rightly, always trying to do.

Being fluent in Shakespeare from an early age imparts one last advantage that has a significance all its own: It gives my children self-confidence. It gives them the tools, as Falstaff might say, to be witty in themselves and be proud of it. As a father, this is one of the best parts of the whole exercise.

### chapter 3

#### The Plan of the Book

Let me outline the plan of this book so you know what's coming. Then we'll get right back to I know a bank.

#### The Twenty-five Passages

Together you and I will teach your children twenty-five passages of Shakespeare by heart. We'll start with short, accessible passages; then gradually we'll increase the length and complexity of the passages until, toward the end, we'll go for a few entire soliloquies.

I have strong views about which plays—and which passages from these plays—your children will find it easiest to start with, and I have put them in a very specific order. If you follow this order, I can just about guarantee that your kids won't get bogged down and frustrated.

I think that children do best by starting with the comedies. Specifically, I find that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Twelfth Night* are the most child-friendly of all the plays, and we'll spend a good deal of time on them. We'll then move more quickly through the canon in order to expose your children to some of Shakespeare's most famous works. *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, are simply part of our cultural DNA and cannot be missed.

### Shakespeare's Language

In every chapter, I'll be quoting a great deal of Shakespeare's poetry and prose in addition to the passages being memorized. I'm doing this to expose your children to as much of Shakespeare's language as possible. I've chosen these additional passages carefully, as I want your children to come away from this book with a level of familiarity with Shakespeare that they can't get elsewhere. In every case, you and your children should read the additional passages aloud.

### The Stories and Characters

Along with the passages themselves, we'll teach your children the plots and characters to go with them. This is not only valuable in itself but will help them memorize the passages more quickly, and they'll remember them longer. If you learn the line *Lord what fools these mortals be!* and associate it with a hilarious little sprite named Robin Goodfellow in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, you'll never forget either the character or the line.

## Users Review

### From reader reviews:

#### **Paul Howard:**

The particular book *How to Teach Your Children Shakespeare* will bring someone to the new experience of reading some sort of book. The author style to describe the idea is very unique. In the event you try to find new book to see, this book very acceptable to you. The book *How to Teach Your Children Shakespeare* is much recommended to you to read. You can also get the e-book from official web site, so you can quicker to read the book.

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