

AP English Literature and Composition
Hamlet: Study questions to focus your reading

Here are some questions to look over after you have read.

Some questions will be assigned from time to time; these questions should help keep you oriented in the text.

You are responsible for understanding the literary terms listed on this sheet.

Reading 1 (1.1)

1. Read the opening aloud—it is strange. Who approaches whom? Who is surprised?
2. Summarize the military exposition typical of Shakespeare's tragedies.
3. At the end of the scene, what will the other watchmen do?

Literary term:
exposition

Reading 2 (1.2–1.3)

1.2

1. Consider Claudius's intro speech (ll. 1–39): What is the tone of the speech? How does the speech establish this tone? Use antithesis and irony in your answer.
2. Hamlet speaks. How do his words show his mental state?
3. Look at the "Seems" speech (ll. 79–89): What theme is set forth here?
Explain the clothing metaphor. Keep track of other instances of the clothing motif as you read.
4. Analyze Claudius's rhetoric in his speech ll. 90–121. Consider audience and purpose and the 'visible means of persuasion' (Aristotle) in the speech.
5. Hamlet's Soliloquy #1 (ll. 134–164)
What is the cause of Hamlet's 'excessive' grief?
Analyze the speech's use of metaphor and metonymy.
6. What do you notice about the mood and tone changes in the scene? Comment on the theme of changeability.
7. Trace elements of Hamlet's characterization throughout 1.2

1.3

8. How does Ophelia regard Laertes's advice?

9. How does Laertes regard Polonius's advice?

Literary terms:

tone

antithesis

irony: dramatic, situational, verbal

metaphor

metonymy

rhetoric

pun

theme

motif (leitmotiv)

soliloquy

Reading 3 (1.4–2.1)

1.4

1. What does the personification at the beginning of the scene add to the mood/atmosphere?

2. Hamlet explains the concept of hamartia (ll. 26–41). How does this description apply to Claudius? How does it apply to Hamlet?

3. Why shouldn't Hamlet follow the Ghost?

4. Why, according to the text, is Hamlet willing to follow the Ghost?

1.5

5. How, according to the Ghost, is the afterlife?

6. What does the Ghost ask Hamlet to do?

7. How quickly does Hamlet say he will avenge the Ghost?

8. Explain the extension of the theme of 'seeming,' also called appearance and reality, through the Ghost's speech, ll.49–98, and in Hamlet's response.

9. What does Hamlet warn his friends that he may do (ll. 191–192)?

2.1

10. What does Polonius want Reynaldo to do? In what (strange) way?

11. How does Polonius's diction (l. 70 and elsewhere) influence your sense of him as a character?

12. How does Hamlet go to Ophelia? What does Polonius infer about the cause of Hamlet's manner?

Literary terms:

personification

hamartia

theme of appearance and reality

Reading 4 (2.2)

1. How does the Queen persuade Rosencrantz and Guildenstern to do her and the King's bidding (ll. 19–26)?
2. What does the Queen initially say is the cause of Hamlet's madness? Later, is she persuaded by Polonius's ideas? Describe her character—why might she want to believe Polonius?
3. Polonius says (in an aside) about Hamlet's talk, "Though this be madness, yet there is method in 't" (ll. 223–224). What logic is there in what Hamlet says and does in this scene?
4. What does Hamlet say about the fashion for child actors? How does he link this fashion with his own personal situation?
5. Explain the parallels between the story of Priam's slaughter with Hamlet's situation.
6. List the 5–6 main ideas in Soliloquy #2. Include short, frequent quotations to support the most important parts.

Literary term

aside

Reading 5 (3.1–3.2)

3.1

1. In the interaction before Hamlet's "To be or not to be" soliloquy, the theme of appearances and reality develops further. Trace its development, including Claudius's aside in lines 56–62.
2. As with Soliloquy #2, divide Soliloquy #3 into sections that correspond with the main ideas. Trace the development of the 3–5 main ideas in the speech.
3. The "To be or not to be" soliloquy contains an idea about the effect of thought on action. Where else in the play so far have you seen that concept?
4. Why do you think Hamlet is so cruel to Ophelia in the "Get thee to a nunnery" scene?

3.2

5. Why do you think Hamlet gives so much direction to the Players?
6. Contrast Hamlet's view and treatment of Horatio with his view and treatment of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern and his view and treatment of Ophelia.
7. Write a character sketch of Ophelia, using evidence so far from the text.
8. Explore the pipe/recorder metaphor (ll. 375–402).
9. List main ideas in Soliloquy #4, ll. 419–432. Explore how imagery, allusion, apostrophe, metonymy, and synecdoche are at work.

Literary terms:

allusion
apostrophe
synecdoche
character sketch
enumeratio

Reading 6 (3.3–3.4)

3.3

1. The King uses personification of madness and fear at the beginning of this scene. Find examples (or similar examples that you explain well) and talk about the effect of this personification.
2. What does Claudius's soliloquy tell us about his character?
3. Why does Hamlet choose not to kill Claudius in this scene? Is this reservation valid?

3.4

4. In the scene with Hamlet and his mother, he begins by saying he will "set...up a glass" (l. 24). Explain how Hamlet does this. Look for stylistic devices that indicate reversal and repetition, as mirrors provide. Consider examples along the lines of antithesis and chiasmus as well as his choices of imagery, allusion, metaphor, and personification.
5. Throughout the play so far, there have been many ways this mirror imagery might work: doubles/Doppelgänger, foils in characters as well as other parallels/splits that relate to other elements of fiction. Give examples that back up an idea that mirroring is important in this text.

Literary terms:

chiasmus
Doppelgänger
foil
elements of fiction

Reading 7 (4.1–4.7)

4.1

1. Gertrude calls Hamlet mad at the beginning of the scene. Do you think she believes this, or do you think she is now in league with him?
2. What motivates Claudius to ship Hamlet to England?

4.2–3

3. What is the emotional effect of the business surrounding the hidden body of Polonius? How are stylistic devices (metaphor, logic/syllogism, others) used to contribute to this emotional effect?

4.4

4. In Hamlet's Soliloquy #5 (4.4.34–69), we can see traces of (or actual references to) recent events and ideas. Find 2–3 of these traces or references and explain how they contribute to Hamlet's thought.

4.5

5. What information do you glean from this scene that helps you understand Ophelia's character and situation?
6. Ophelia's speech in ll. 199–210 is very famous. What is the overall emotional effect of the speech and what stylistic moves serve to help the speech achieve the effect?

4.6

7. This turn in the plot is a *deus ex machina* that returns Hamlet to Denmark. Pirates were a contemporary problem in Elizabethan/Jacobean England. Speculate, using evidence from the text, about what has really happened.

4.7

8. In this scene, Claudius persuades Laertes to join forces with him and to carry out a plot to kill Hamlet. Analyze Claudius's rhetoric throughout this scene.
9. Gertrude comes in at the end of the scene and describes vividly Ophelia's drowning. What is the effect of the placement of this speech in the scene? What are the effects of the speech's imagery on the mood, and to that end the pace, of the play?

Literary terms:

syllogism

overall emotional effect

deus ex machina

imagery

Reading 8 (5.1–5.2)

5.1

1. How and why (to what end) is humor used in the beginning of 5.1? By what devices is humor achieved? Consider what you see as well as what I suggest in the literary terms below. Your answer should be complete and correct, but you need not use all of the terms I name.
2. What does the gravedigger scene have to say about the nature of death? How, using what literary devices, does it make clear its ideas?
3. What do you make of the competitive grief of Laertes and Hamlet?

5.2

4. How does Hamlet's characterization develop in the beginning (through l. 112) of 5.2? What do you think of him; what are his motives?
5. How would you characterize the conversation between Hamlet and Laertes before they begin to duel? Is it courteous? truthful?
6. Hamlet says, "I'll be your foil, Laertes" (l. 272). To what degree is Laertes a foil for Hamlet? Are they Doppelgänger? Which label is better? Why?
7. Thinking of Aristotle's ideas of tragedy, how do you think of the play: what is the peripeteia? what is Hamlet's hamartia? does he have an anagnorisis?
8. What are the important elements of the play's return to homeostasis? Is it satisfying?

Literary terms:

malapropism
verbal irony
incongruity
juxtaposition
foil
peripeteia
anagnorisis
homeostasis