

1

Act 1: Prospects and problems

How does Shakespeare open the play in Act 1?



Your progress in this unit:

- understand Shakespeare’s decision about how to open the play
- explain the way Shakespeare establishes character
- explore Shakespeare’s ideas in the play, and the social and political context
- analyse Shakespeare’s use of language, form and structure
- develop your written response skills.

GETTING STARTED - THE PLAY AND YOU

Thinking about the opening of the play

Romeo and Juliet is one of Shakespeare’s best-loved and most frequently performed plays. The famous story of star-crossed lovers (with its **themes** of youthful romance, teenage rebellion and violent conflict between social groups) remains as relevant in the 21st century as it was at the end of the 16th century.

- 1 What do you already know about the play *Romeo and Juliet*? How would you introduce it to someone who hasn’t seen it?
- 2 The action of the play starts with a fight. If you are in a situation where there is an argument, do you:
 - a jump into the middle of it without thinking?
 - b have doubts about getting involved and hang back?
 - c try to act as peacemaker?



Watch a three-minute summary of the play on Cambridge Elevate.

GETTING CLOSER - FOCUS ON DETAILS

How does Shakespeare use Act 1 to get the audience involved?

Act 1 (in a play of five acts) is mostly about setting up the play. In Act 1 of *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare wants to establish the basic outline of the plot and the characters, and also the atmosphere and the main ideas.

Most importantly, he wants to engage his audience through his use of language and dramatic devices. Read through the key details for each scene in the flow diagram, to get an overview of Act 1.

- 1 In groups, read the plot summary and discuss what is being ‘established’ in Act 1.
 - a Then, on your own, write a short (50- to 100-word) trailer for a new film of *Romeo and Juliet*.
 - b Concentrate only on information about Act 1 and try to use key details and words from the text to grab the audience’s attention and make them want to see it.
 - c Compare your trailer with those produced by some other members of your group.



Key terms

theme: an idea or concept that recurs throughout a play.

Prologue

The Chorus introduces the play, describing the conflict between the Montague and Capulet families and the fate of the lovers, Romeo and Juliet.

Scene 2

Lord Capulet is talking to Paris, who wishes to marry Juliet and will woo her at the masked ball that evening. Romeo and Benvolio hear about the ball and decide to go.

Scene 1

Servants of the Montague family fight with servants of the Capulet family. The audience sees the enmity between Lord Capulet and Lord Montague, and how Prince Escalus breaks up the fight. Romeo is introduced. He's in low spirits because he's in love with Rosaline, but she's not interested.

Scene 3

Lady Capulet tells Juliet and her Nurse (who has looked after Juliet since she was a baby) that there are plans for Juliet to marry Paris.

Scene 4

Romeo, Benvolio and Mercutio are outside the Capulet mansion, where the ball is taking place. Mercutio tries to persuade Romeo to cheer up, forget Rosaline and go to the ball.

Scene 5

At the ball, Romeo is overwhelmed by Juliet's beauty: '**O she doth teach the torches to burn bright!**' They meet and fall in love. There is almost another fight between the warring families when Tybalt spots Romeo, but Lord Capulet stops him. Later, Juliet learns from her Nurse that Romeo is a Montague. Even so, she realises that she loves him.

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PROLOGUE AND ACT 1 SCENE 1:
MAJOR AND MINOR CHARACTERS

Shakespeare’s use of fate in the Prologue

Shakespeare introduces the play with a Prologue, which tells the audience what is going to happen. Spoiler alert! *Romeo and Juliet* is a story where the audience already knows the ending: the lovers die. (It’s rather like the film *Titanic*, where everyone knows the ship is going to sink.)

- 1

Put these statements in rank order according to how convincing you think they are, and explain your decisions:
- A

People will watch in case there is a surprise ending after all.

B

People will watch because they are fans of the actors.

C

People will watch because there will be exciting special effects.

D

People will watch because they will be emotionally involved in the story.

E

People will watch because they know the ending but the characters don’t.

- 2

Look again at the Prologue. How do you know that:

a

the hatred between the two families has been going on for a long time

b

their hatred has turned Verona into a war zone

c

the two young people will fall in love

d

their love will end in death for both of them

e

there is nothing they can do to stop this, as it is all fated to happen?
- 3

Use a table like this one to list the similarities between the Montagues and the Capulets, as described in the Prologue. Two examples have been done for you. What other details can you find?

What details suggest that the two families have things in common at the start of the play?	In line 1 we are told that both families are ‘ alike in dignity ’ (they are both equal in their high social status).
What details suggest that the two families will have things in common by the end of the play?	In line 8 the Chorus explains that Romeo and Juliet’s deaths will ‘bury their parents’ strife’ (put an end to their fighting).




A pair of star-crossed lovers
take their life;
Whose misadventured piteous
overthrows
Doth with their death bury their
parents’ strife.

Chorus: *The Prologue*, lines 6–8

1 Prospects and problems

- 4 Work in pairs. Think of an idea for a photograph to illustrate each of the following phrases from the Prologue. Make notes on each one.
- a Two households
 - b From ancient grudge break to new mutiny
 - c A pair of star-crossed lovers take their life
 - d Doth with their death bury their parents' strife
 - e The fearful passage of their death-marked love
 - f Is now the two hours' traffic of our stage
 - g The which if you with patient ears attend



Now watch a video of actors doing this task on Cambridge Elevate.

Minor characters

Following the Prologue, Shakespeare opens Scene 1 with a conversation between two minor characters, Sampson and Gregory.

- 1 Look at Sampson and Gregory's conversation in lines 1–30.
- a Choose two words from the word bank to describe their **dialogue**.
- witty


intelligent

aggressive

bigoted


boastful

crude
- b Find a quotation from their dialogue to support each of your choices.
- 2 The comic chat between Sampson and Gregory is followed by an argument, which leads to a fight.
- a Look at lines 28–63. What examples can you find of language used in a way that expresses anger or causes offence?
 - b In a group, choose two lines or phrases from this part of the scene that you think would be most likely to start a fight.



Key terms

dialogue: a conversation between two or more people in a piece of writing.



Contexts

Shakespeare's audience was partly made up of young boys who were learning a trade. They were known as apprentices and often caused trouble on London streets. Some critics have argued that the rude jokes in *Romeo and Juliet* were put in to please the apprentices, while the lords and ladies enjoyed the poetic speeches in the play. However, it's quite possible that the apprentices also enjoyed poetry, and that lords and ladies laughed at the rude bits as much as anyone else.

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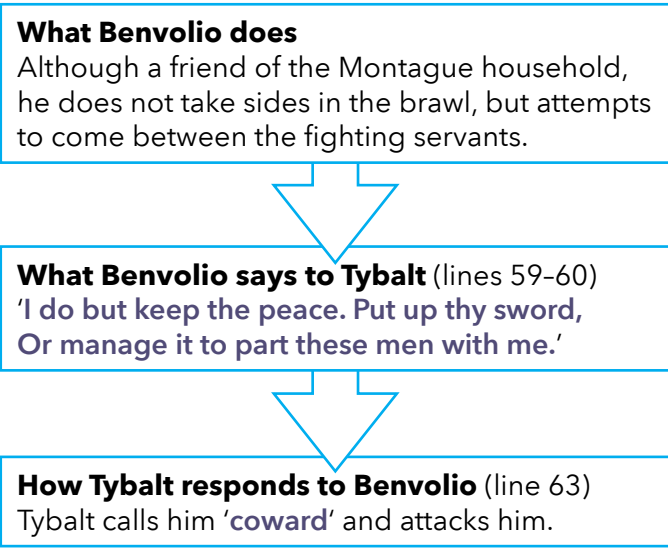
Major characters


Shakespeare introduces several major characters in this first scene: Lord Montague, Lord and Lady Capulet, Romeo and Benvolio. Shakespeare uses them to show certain attitudes, which may change during the play.

Characterisation is the art of making a character believable. Writers establish characters in three key ways, through:

- **what they say** (their language, vocabulary and the images they use)
- **what they do** (their actions, their reactions to events and their expressions of feeling)
- **how others respond to them or speak about them** (the language used to describe them and how people act or behave in their presence).

When exploring character, certain incidents offer useful evidence. When one character responds to, or speaks about another, you may learn something about both of them. An example is shown in this flow diagram.



 Read more about characterisation in *Romeo and Juliet* in Unit 8.

- 1 In pairs, discuss how this incident gives a sense of Benvolio’s character.
- 2 What do you learn about Tybalt from this encounter?
- 3 Create a similar flow diagram for Lord Montague. Compare his brief dialogue with his wife (lines 70–71) to his conversation with Benvolio (lines 145–8). What two sides of his character do these dialogues reveal?

Although the Prince is a minor character, he is the ruler of Verona and represents law and order. He is important in this scene because he stops the fighting that has broken out and makes it clear that any future rioting will lead to the death penalty.

- 4 Read lines 72–95. Imagine you are a director who is rehearsing this speech with the actor playing the Prince. The Prince has asked you to explain some of the phrases and how they might be delivered to best effect. The first phrase has been done for you as an example.

What ho! you men, you beasts!
That quench the fire of your pernicious rage
With purple fountains issuing from your veins:

Prince: Act 1 Scene 1, lines 74–76

The Prince expresses his anger by shouting ‘What, ho!’ to get the attention of his subjects. He is annoyed at the brutality of their fighting, describing them as ‘beasts’ rather than civilised men. As a figure of authority and power, his language is suitably impressive and elaborate. The Prince describes the rioters’ rage as ‘pernicious’ (wicked); their blood is like ‘purple fountains’. It is important to him to express his status by using such grand terms.

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Choose one of these quotations and think about what you might say.

On pain of torture, from those bloody hands
Throw your mistempered weapons to the ground,
And hear the sentence of your movèd prince.

Prince: Act 1 Scene 1, lines 77-79

Three civil brawls, bred of an airy word,
By thee, old Capulet, and Montague,
Have thrice disturbed the quiet of our streets ...

Prince: Act 1 Scene 1, lines 80-82



Watch the Prince’s speech on Cambridge Elevate.

Form and structure of language

Shakespeare also varies the form of his language. In this scene, he uses **prose** for the servants, **blank verse** (which is usually written in **iambic pentameter**) for the Prince, and rhymed **verse** for the dialogue of Benvolio and Romeo. Here is an example of the Prince’s speech:

If ever you disturb our streets again,
Your lives shall pay the forfeit of the peace.

Prince: Act 1 Scene 1, lines 87-88

In Act 1, Scene 1, lines 208-209, Romeo and Benvolio share rhymes:

Benvolio: Then she hath sworn that she will still live chaste?

Romeo: She hath, and in that sparing makes huge waste:

- 1 Can you suggest one possible reason why Shakespeare does this with Romeo and Benvolio’s language?
- 2 Where does Scene 1 change between prose, blank verse and rhymed verse?
- 3 Look at what is happening at those moments and what the characters talk about. Why might Shakespeare have made those changes?



Key terms

characterisation: the way a writer paints a picture of a particular character, through their words, actions and reactions.

prose: writing that follows the style of normal speech.

blank verse: unrhymed verse with carefully placed stressed and unstressed syllables.

iambic pentameter: the rhythm created by a line of ten syllables with five stressed syllables.

verse: writing that has a particular rhyme, pattern or rhythm.

If ever you disturb our streets again,
Your lives shall pay the forfeit of the peace.

Prince: Act 1 Scene 1, lines 87-88





Take thou some new infection
to thy eye,
And the rank poison of the old
will die.

Benvolio: Act 1 Scene 2, lines 48–49

ACT I SCENES 2 AND 3: CONTEXT,
LANGUAGE AND RELATIONSHIPS

Context and language in Act 1 Scene 2

1 Look at this table, comparing family life in Shakespeare’s England with family life in modern Britain.

In Shakespeare’s Tudor England	In most families in modern Britain
Prosperous parents arrange their child’s marriage.	Adult children choose their own marriage partners.
Thirteen-year-old girls get married and have children.	The minimum age for sexual relations and marriage is 16.
Families usually include two parents.	One-parent families are common.
Girls only inherit their parents’ estate if they have no brothers.	Girls and boys have an equal right to inherit their parents’ estate.

- a Which of the statements in the left-hand column might a 21st-century British audience find most shocking?
- b Which of the statements in the right-hand column might a 16th-century English audience find most shocking?

2 How far does Shakespeare present Lord Capulet as:


- a a caring parent who wants the best for his daughter
- b a father who regards his daughter as his property?

This scene begins with Lord Capulet and Paris discussing Paris’s wish to marry Juliet. Juliet’s father stresses that his daughter is still only thirteen but says he will approve the marriage if Juliet also agrees. Benvolio enters and talks persuasively to Romeo about love. Benvolio uses two related images:

Take thou some new infection to thy eye.
And the rank poison of the old will die.

Benvolio: Act 1 Scene 2, lines 48–49

- 3 Read Benvolio’s lines carefully.
- a What is Benvolio advising Romeo to do?
 - b What does Benvolio’s choice of **imagery** tell you about his attitude to relationships?
 - c What are the **connotations** of these images? Relate the connotations to the themes established in the Prologue, and developed in the Prince’s warning to the troublemakers in Scene 1. What do the connotations suggest about the dangers of love for Romeo?

Key terms

imagery: language intended to conjure up a vivid picture in the reader or audience’s mind.

connotation: an idea or a feeling linked to the main meaning of a word – what it implies or suggests in addition to its literal meaning.

1 Prospects and problems



Learning checkpoint

To improve your discussion of language, you should move from explaining to examining, and from examining to analysing.

- ✓ **Explain:** say what words mean; offer reasons for the writer’s choice of words or imagery.
- ✓ **Examine:** look at the connotations and effects of particular words; relate them to the writer’s purpose.
- ✓ **Analyse:** focus on specific words and images; suggest a range of possible connotations and effects.

The relationships in Act 1 Scene 3

Scene 3 includes three women (and a male servant, who appears briefly at the end). Shakespeare shows us a lot about the women’s personalities and their relationships with each other:

- Lady Capulet asks a question and issues an order all in one line
- The nurse is talkative and humorous
- Juliet is polite and obedient.

In lines 61–63 the Nurse says:

Thou wast the prettiest babe that e’er I nursed.
And I might live to see thee married once,
I have my wish.

Earlier in the scene she refers to Juliet as ‘lamb’ and ‘ladybird’. The Nurse is clearly showing warmth and affection for Juliet.

- 1 How typical is this of the way that she treats Juliet in the rest of the scene?

In comparison in lines 70–75, Lady Capulet says:

Well, think of marriage now; younger than you,
Here in Verona, ladies of esteem,
Are made already mothers. By my count,
I was your mother much upon these years
That you are now a maid. Thus then in brief:
The valiant Paris seeks you for his love.

- 2 Notice that Juliet’s mother seems less concerned with Juliet as a person and more intent on arranging for her an appropriately high-status husband (‘valiant Paris’). This will allow her to become a mother at a very young age.
 - a Read quickly through the Nurse and Lady Capulet’s lines in the rest of this scene. As you do so, pay close attention to what the two women have to say about Juliet’s childhood and about marriage.
 - b On the basis of your enquiry, which character do you think shows greater understanding of Juliet and her situation?

Well, think of marriage now;
younger than you,
Here in Verona, ladies of esteem,
Are made already mothers.

Lady Capulet: Act 1 Scene 3, lines 70–72





If thou art Dun we'll draw thee
from the mire,
Or (save your reverence) love,
wherein thou stickest
Up to the ears.

Mercutio: Act 1 Scene 4, lines 41–43

ACT 1 SCENES 4 AND 5: CHARACTER,
LANGUAGE AND SETTING

Character and language in Act 1 Scene 4

In Scene 4 the action returns to Romeo and Mercutio, who are meeting outside the Capulet mansion (lines 44–101). Earlier (in Scene 2) Benvolio tried to convince Romeo to forget Rosaline and look at other girls. In Scene 4 Mercutio tries to convince him to forget love altogether, and have a good time.

- 1 We've already seen Romeo with Benvolio. Now we see him with another, very different friend.
- a What three words sum up your initial impression of Mercutio? Find evidence to support your response.
 - b How is Mercutio's response to Romeo's troubles different from Benvolio's in Scene 2?
 - c Romeo's reaction to Mercutio at lines 95–6, 'Peace, peace, Mercutio, peace! / Thou talk'st of nothing' (Be quiet, Mercutio, you're talking nonsense), echoes Juliet's reaction to the Nurse in the previous scene (Scene 3 line 59). Why does Romeo choose to interrupt Mercutio at that precise moment? What does Mercutio say that seems to spark Romeo's response?



Watch a discussion about Mercutio's character on Cambridge Elevate.

- 2 Now read the following lines closely:

If thou art Dun we'll draw thee from the mire,
Or (save your reverence) love, wherein thou stickest
Up to the ears.

Mercutio: Act 1 Scene 4, lines 41–43

- a What do you think Mercutio means by 'save your reverence'?
- b What is implied by his use of the word 'mire' to describe love?
- a What does this add to the impression created by Benvolio's use of the words 'infection' and 'poison' to describe physical attraction in Scene 2?

Setting and context in Act 1 Scene 5



Contexts

Masked balls were popular in Elizabethan Italy but some people disapproved of them because they thought wearing disguises encouraged immoral behaviour. (This was probably true. Perhaps it also helped to explain the popularity of these events!)



Read more about language in *Romeo and Juliet* in Unit 10.

1 Prospects and problems

- 1
- Scene 5 returns to a masked ball at the Capulets’ mansion. Romeo sees Juliet and is amazed by her beauty; they speak, and then kiss.
- a
- How has the atmosphere of the setting changed from Scenes 2-3?
- b
- How might the party atmosphere account for the characters’ behaviour?
- c
- How might the fact that the partygoers are masked influence their actions?
- 2
- Romeo and Juliet speak for the first time in lines 92-109. Look at the language they are using. What do you notice about the rhyming pattern of lines 92-105? These 14 lines (92-105) make up a **sonnet**, which has a distinctive **rhyme scheme**.
- a
- To understand the literal meaning of Romeo’s words in this passage, write it out as plain modern English sentences (prose). The first part of Romeo’s speech (lines 92-93) has been modelled for you:

Romeo: If I profane with my unworthiest
hand
This holy shrine ...

Modern English:

‘Your hands are like a sacred place of worship. If I touch them with my unworthy hands I might dishonour them ... ’

- b
- Notice that Romeo uses words connected with religion such as ‘**profane**’ and ‘**holy shrine**’. Can you trace a pattern of such words through the lovers’ exchange?



Listen to a performance of this scene on Cambridge Elevate.

- 3
- What does Juliet’s role in this exchange tell you about her personality and her attitude to Romeo?

- 4
- Read her speech carefully.
- a
- Make a note of the positive and negative words she uses.
- For example when Juliet says ‘**Ay, pilgrim, lips that they must use in prayer**’, she might well be suggesting that lips are for speaking religious language rather than for kissing a young man who has just appeared!
- b
- Look carefully at all the other words she uses when speaking to Romeo, and decide whether you think they are meant to encourage his attentions or not. You may find that it’s not quite so obvious in all cases.
- 5
- Imagine that you are directing a modern performance of *Romeo and Juliet*. Think about how you would stage this scene. You will need to consider:
- a
- where you would set the scene
- b
- how Romeo suddenly notices Juliet in the hustle and bustle of the dance and music
- c
- how, and where, they talk to each other without being noticed by the other people
- d
- how you would stage their first, dramatic kiss.

Work in a group and discuss how you would do this.



Watch actors and a director discuss this scene on Cambridge Elevate.



Key terms

sonnet: a verse form that English poets liked to use during the 16th century, especially when writing about love. It is a poem of 14 lines.

rhyme scheme: the pattern of a poem’s rhyme, often identified by letters such as ABAB.

GCSE English Literature for AQA: Romeo and Juliet

GETTING IT INTO WRITING

Writing about Shakespeare’s use of language

The meeting of Romeo and Juliet is the climax of Act 1. Below are examples of three student responses to this part of the play. Each has been highlighted and annotated to show a key writing skill – writing about language.

RESPONSE 1

Romeo meets Juliet at the Capulets’ party. He tries to chat her up by saying: ‘If I profane with my unworhiest hand / This holy shrine’. This shows that he is holding her hand. Then he says: ‘My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand / To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss’. This tells us that he wants to kiss her hand. Juliet says he is a ‘Good pilgrim’ and ‘you do wrong your hand too much’. This shows that she doesn’t mind him touching her hand. I reckon he kisses her hand, although it doesn’t say so. Then he talks her into letting him kiss her on the lips. I know this because it says ‘he kisses her’. This shows that Romeo is very persuasive.

explains the literal meaning

explains the literal meaning

explains the literal meaning

explains effect

RESPONSE 2

Romeo is trying to persuade Juliet to let him kiss her. He starts off by touching her hand. This is because he hopes she will let him kiss her hand. I know this because he says: ‘My lips, two blushing pilgrims, ready stand / To smooth that rough touch with a tender kiss’. He calls her hand a ‘holy shrine’. This makes it seem like it’s really important to Romeo and he doesn’t feel worthy to touch it. He hopes she will then let him kiss her on the lips. I think Romeo is very clever in the way he shows this, almost like he tricks Juliet because he says ‘Have not saints lips?’ He is calling Juliet a saint, which implies that she is an object of worship to him, but he’s saying that he’s interested in her lips not just her palm. Not only does Romeo call Juliet a saint, Juliet calls Romeo ‘Good pilgrim’. A pilgrim is someone who would travel to a shrine, so this is suggesting that she doesn’t mind being touched by Romeo because the word ‘pilgrim’ has positive connotations, of someone whose motives are pure. This is reinforced by the fact that she says ‘good’ pilgrim. That’s why she lets him kiss her.

explains the literal meaning

begins to explore connotation

more confident exploration

confident exploration; beginning to analyse



If I profane with my unworhiest
hand
This holy shrine ...

Romeo: Act 1 Scene 5, lines 92–93

1 Prospects and problems

RESPONSE 3

To start off with, Juliet seems not to be very interested because she responds to Romeo in a joking way. When he says that he will smooth his rough touch with a kiss she responds by saying, 'palm to palm is holy palmer's kiss'. She seems to be saying that his touch is all she wants, and there is no need for him to kiss her hand. The use of the word 'holy' is interesting because we don't normally associate a meeting of lovers with the idea of something being sacred. There is a lot of religious language like this in their conversation, which tells us a lot about the time Shakespeare was writing about, when religious beliefs were very important. Unlike for modern teenagers, for Romeo and Juliet becoming lovers was something they had to think about from this point of view, as well as worrying about the wishes of their parents. We can see this too in the way Romeo and Juliet both talk about 'sin' which means wrongdoing, almost as if they worry that what they are doing is wrong, but they can't help it because they are falling in love. This is shown by the fact that although Juliet is uncertain at the start, she is persuaded by Romeo and allows him to kiss her lips; love makes what is 'sinful' seem 'holy'.


explains language use

develops exploration into analysis

explores connotation

develops exploration into analysis

Now, using the work you have done in this unit, write a response of around 300 words to the following question:



Complete this assignment on Cambridge Elevate.

How does Shakespeare use language in the Prince's address to his subjects (Act 1 Scene 1, lines 72-94)?

- 1 Write about:
- a

the literal meanings of words
- b

their connotations
- c

the Prince's use of imagery and poetry
- d

how effective you find his persuasive techniques
- e

how successfully you think he asserts his power and authority.

2 Use examples from the text to support your ideas. You should also use the annotations from the sample responses to guide you in practising these skills.

GETTING FURTHER

Fate, the idea that our lives are shaped by forces beyond our control, is an important theme in *Romeo and Juliet*. How has reading and watching the first five scenes of the play developed your understanding of this theme? You might want to fill in a table like this one, to organise your thoughts.

What did I know when I read the Prologue?	Romeo and Juliet are 'star-crossed'.
What did I think then?	Fate has decided they will meet.
What do I know now, at the end of Scene 5?	Romeo already feels 'Some consequence yet hanging in the stars'.
What do I think now?	By agreeing to go to the party he is accepting his fate.