Synopsis of Story

“Macbeth is the story of a man, Macbeth, whose ambitions run wild. To become King he first kills the current innocent king, Duncan. Then he kills the king’s guards in an attempt to pin the murder on them. He then plots to murder a nobleman, Banquo, and his son, Fleance, because three witches have predicted that Banquo’s offspring will become king. After Banquo is slain, Macbeth thinks he sees Banquo’s ghost at a banquet. Later he has the wife and children of a general, Macduff, slain after the three witches warn him to beware MacDuff. Before the play ends, Macbeth kills Siward, a supporter of Macduff, in battle. Finally, in the last act, Macbeth battles Macduff who slays him and displays Macbeth’s “cursed head” for all to see. This is the story of how one murder begets another and how one man’s ambitions plague a nation.”

Study Questions

Instructions
1. Use the handout on Shakespeare’s verse to inform your answers
2. Please read through each short reading and the appendix as you work through this handout
3. Please make specific reference to the play and use quotations to substantiate your points
4. Regarding Gateway activities, more information and instructions will soon follow

Act 1

1. What are we told about Macbeth’s life and character up to the time the play begins? What opinions do others have him?

READING 1 – THE LANGUAGE OF THE WITCHES

The language of the Witches

In Scene 3, Macbeth describes the three Witches as ‘secret, black and midnight hags’. They deliberately contribute to the disorder or chaos that spreads throughout the play like a deadly infection.

What you should notice quite quickly is that the rhythms and patterns of the Witches’ language are different from those of the language typically used by the play’s central characters:

• Rather than speaking in iambic pentameter with ten beats per line (te-DUM, te-DUM, te-DUM, te-DUM, te-DUM: see page 11 for an explanation), the Witches use a shorter, quicker rhythm. They tend to speak in a type of trochaic tetrameter (DOUB-le, DOUB-le, TOIL and TROUB-le), yet rather than having eight beats per line, most have only seven (WHEN shall WE three MEET a-GAIN?). This is even more unusual, clearly setting them apart from the other characters.
• This distinctive rhythm helps to create a sinister, chant-like (incantatory) quality, reinforcing the Witches’ evil nature.
• You should also notice in later scenes the Witches’ particular use of repetition: repeating words twice (Act 1 Scene 3, lines 28 and 31) or even three times (Act 1 Scene 3, lines 11, 49–51, 63–65). This detail enhances our understanding of the Witches’ unnatural quality. They enliven echo each others’ dialogue in an almost telepathic manner, and seem to think as one presence or consciousness.
• Finally, the Witches’ language is dominated by unusual paradoxes (equivocations or contradictory statements that both contain elements of the truth). For example, in Act 1 Scene 1, the Witches’ dialogue includes the paradoxical statements: ‘When the battle’s lost and won’ (line 4) and ‘Fair is foul, and foul is fair’ (line 12).

Be on the lookout for these aspects of the Witches’ language. Remember that Shakespeare uses these devices to differentiate them from the other characters, emphasizing their supernatural ‘otherness’ and their deceptive nature.

2. What are the witches’ original prophecies for Macbeth and Banquo?
3. How does Banquo’s reaction to the witches’s prophecies differ from Macbeth’s?
4. The witches speak mostly in rhyme. Why does Shakespeare differentiate their speech from other characters like Macbeth and Banquo?
5. How does Shakespeare contrast Macbeth’s character with that of Lady Macbeth in Scenes 5 and 7? What argument does Lady Macbeth use to force Macbeth to a decision?

6. How is the Macbeth, the audience sees at the end of this act different from the Macbeth we saw and heard about at the outset?

7. Find two examples of light/darkness imagery from this act, and explain why Shakespeare has chosen to use it at this stage in the play’s action?

**READING 3 – THINKING ABOUT MASCULINITY AND FEMINITY**

The advertising industry creates powerful images of masculinity and femininity. We are told that ‘real’ (thus desirable) men or women have this body shape, drive that car or use those brands of deodorant. You might like to discuss the power and effect of these types of media images.

Notions of masculinity and femininity are central to Macbeth – not the biological concepts of being male or female, but how our society expects men and women to behave. Linked to the concepts of the Great Chain of Being (see page 4), masculinity and femininity were, in Jacobean England, viewed as fixed, God-ordained, and more or less biologically determined. Today, however, they are perceived as more fluid social or cultural constructs.

In Shakespeare’s Macbeth, it is the qualities of bravery, ambition and violence in the character of Macbeth that are espoused above all others as signs of true manliness. In Act 1 Scene 7, Lady Macbeth places an enormous weight on Macbeth’s manhood. In so doing, she is able to motivate him to do what he had already been thinking about: murder King Duncan.
Introducing imagery: blood

Shakespeare’s plays contain an abundance of powerful imagery. In Macbeth these images gain their power through frequent repetition, and from the way they interweave in distinct patterns throughout the play. The imagery of Macbeth is strongly connected with the central themes and ideas of the play.

For example, Shakespeare’s focus on the conflict between good and evil, and between order and chaos, is effectively presented through imagery of violence, especially blood. Macbeth’s rule, even his very character, is repeatedly associated with talk of blood, revealing him to be a particularly violent ‘tyrant’, worthy of Malcolm’s final assessment of him as a ‘butcher’.

ACT 1 Scene 2 portrays Macbeth as a ‘worthy’ soldier, whose sword ‘smoked with bloody execution’ (line 18), who sliced one particular enemy soldier ‘from the nave to th’ chaps’ (line 22), and who, as ‘Bellona’s bridegroom’ (line 54), made the battlefield resemble ‘another Golgotha’ (line 40). Although Macbeth is accustomed to violence on the battlefield, the images of blood become more personal and frightening for him when he weighs up the consequences of murdering the sleeping King Duncan, and he considers ‘bloody instructions’ (Act 1 Scene 7, line 9) and examines ‘gouts of blood’ on an imaginary dagger (Act 2 Scene 1, line 47).

After the violent murder of King Duncan, the rest of the play is saturated with images of blood. Macbeth envisions Duncan’s blood turning ‘the multitudinous seas incarnadine’ (Act 2 Scene 2, line 65), Banquo is killed ‘with twenty trenchèd gashes on his head’ (Act 3 Scene 4, line 27), and Macbeth has Macduff’s entire household savagely slaughtered (Act 4 Scene 2). In fact, so pervasive is this imagery that Act 3 Scene 4 (especially lines 123–27) is characterised by an overwhelming repetition of references to blood. Macbeth even admits, ‘I am in blood / Stepped in so far that, should I wade no more, / Returning were as tedious as go o’er’ (lines 137–39).

Additionally, Lady Macbeth is so obsessed by blood that in Act 5 Scene 1 she washes her hands in her sleep, and is fixated by ‘the smell of the blood’ (line 37). It seems a fitting end to a bloody and violent play that Macbeth is decapitated and Lady Macbeth is reported to have committed suicide (Act 5 Scene 9).
8. For what purpose does Shakespeare give Macbeth a soliloquy in which he sees an imaginary dagger? What is he revealing about Macbeth’s character to the audience?

9. For what purpose does Shakespeare include the Porter and his antics at the beginning of Act 2, Scene 2? What style of verse does the Porter use? Why is this appropriate to his rank in the play?
10. What evidence is that Macbeth’s mental state suffers after murdering Duncan? What images and themes are repeated in his speeches?

11. Why do Banquo, Macduff and Duncan’s sons not trust Macbeth?

12. For what purpose does Shakespeare include Act 2, Scene 4 in the play? What are the old man and Ross talking about? How does this relate to Macbeth’s actions?

**READING 6 - MORE IMAGERY: CLOTHING AND DARKNESS**

More imagery: clothing and darkness

In addition to many images of blood, Shakespeare combines two images in Act 2 Scene 4 to convey a sense of chaos or disorder: references to poorly fitting clothes, and poetic descriptions of light and darkness.

**Images of poorly fitting clothes**

Look up the following textual references and answer the questions. For simplicity, we use the abbreviated form of Act, Scene and line numbers: e.g. Act 1 Scene 3, line 109 is written as 1.3.109.

**Question A**

Q (1.3.109–110, and 1.3.145–147) When King Duncan declares Macbeth the Thane of Cawdor, what might Shakespeare be suggesting by comparing this new position to Macbeth wearing ‘borrowed robes’ or ‘strange garments’?

**Question B**

Q (1.7.32–33) How does Shakespeare link Macbeth’s act of deception with wearing poorly fitting clothes?

**Question C**

Q (2.4.37–38) After the murder of King Duncan, how do Macduff’s references to ‘old robes’ and ‘new [robes]’ relate to Macbeth?

Watch out for more images of ill-fitting clothes towards the end of the play (5.2.15–16 and 5.2.20–22), where various comments about clothes by the Scottish lords reinforce the notion of disorder in Scotland, a state of chaos that stems directly from Macbeth.

**Images of light and darkness**

Shakespeare frequently draws our attention to the conflict between good and evil by means of potent contrasts between light and darkness.

**Question D**

Q (Act 1 Scene 4) How does Shakespeare emphasize the difference between King Duncan (lines 41–42) and Macbeth (lines 50–51) using images of light and darkness?

Shakespeare’s Witches are effectively associated with darkness (1.3.129, 4.1.48). How does their presence in the play contribute to the focus on the conflict between good and evil?

In Act 2, the murders of King Duncan and later Banquo occur in the night during times of unnatural darkness (2.1.1–7; 2.2.14–20; 2.3.46–56). How does this detail reinforce the ‘horror’ of Macbeth’s deeds?

Lady Macbeth calls upon the powers of ‘thick night’ to assist her with the murder of King Duncan (1.5.47–51), however, by the end of the play she descends into madness and possibly suicide. Keep a lookout for how she is constantly seen at night, sleepwalking and carrying a lighted candle (Act 5 Scene 1).

Finally, look for how the darkness of Macbeth’s ‘deed of dreadful note’ soon contaminates all of Scotland, not just metaphorically but literally (see 2.4.1–10 and 4.3.240).
13. How does Shakespeare show the change in Macbeth’s character as he plots the murder of Banquo? What is different about his approach to this murder compared to Duncan’s?

14. What imagery, language and events does Shakespeare use to draw attention to Macbeth’s deteriorating mental state?

READING 8 - A WORD ABOUT REPETITION

A word about repetition

What is the best way to learn anything: times tables, a musical instrument, a foreign language or even how to drive a car? The answer is repetition, repetition, repetition. And sometimes the best way for an author to emphasize the central themes of a text is by repetition of key words, phrases and ideas.

Throughout Macbeth, Shakespeare’s characters make frequent reference to blood, darkness and time (see discussion of imagery on pages 25, 74 and 82). The echoing of these words and ideas throughout the entire play fashion a bigger picture of the corrupting effect of Macbeth’s, which plunges Scotland into a state of chaos. The frequent reiteration of words or images, almost saturating the mind, has an accumulative effect which we call cumulation.

There is also abundant repetition of key words and phrases within various scenes. Shakespeare uses this sort of repetition to assist in making the characters’ dialogue memorable, as well as to draw our attention to the significance of the characters’ actions and motives.
**Act 4**

15. What are the three new prophecies that the witches make to Macbeth? What questions do they refuse to answer? What is the meaning of the three apparitions that Macbeth sees in the witches’ cave?

**READING 9 – THINKING ABOUT THE CONSEQUENCES OF DECEPTION**

Thinking about the consequences of deception

A recurring theme throughout Macbeth is **deception and its consequences**. The consequences of deception are usually – but not always – negative, both for those who are deceived and for those practising the deception.

At the heart of the play is the conflict between illusion and reality, between what **seems** to be true and what is **actually** true. The characters are deceived when reality is hidden beneath words or appearances that only seem to be true. For example, in Act 1 Scene 3, Macbeth and Banquo are unsure if the Witches are real (lines 39–42 and 80–83), and Macbeth doubts whether his murderous thoughts can be trusted (lines 140–43). Moreover, can Macbeth trust his senses when he sees a dagger before him, prior to murdering King Duncan (Act 2 Scene 1, lines 34–50)?

**Q** Re-read Act 1 Scene 3, lines 52–53 and 60; and Act 1 Scene 4, lines 11–14.

These lines refer to the deception of King Duncan by the Thane of Cawdor, who pretends to be loyal when in fact he is a traitor. What are the consequences of this deception for the Thane of Cawdor and for King Duncan?

The central acts of deception are performed by Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. Create a table similar to the one on the next page for your notes to show your understanding of the theme of deception.

16. Explain these lines:

"From this moment
The very firstlings of my heart shall be
the firstling of my hand"

17. For what purpose is Scene 3, Act 4 included in the play’s structure by Shakespeare? What does this conversation reveal about Malcom, MacDuff and others attitudes towards Macbeth?
Act 5

18. How is the deterioration of Lady Macbeth’s mental state represented to the audience?

19. Trace Macbeth’s changes of mood throughout this act? How does Macbeth react to his wife’s death? What does it show about Macbeth’s own character at this point?

20. How is each of the witches’ prophecies fulfilled?

21. How do Macbeth’s better qualities – such as courage and humanity – show themselves during this act? Does this make Macbeth a greater and more interesting play, than if Shakespeare had let Macbeth become nothing else but a villain who is out of control?

Reading 11: Thinking about time

Thinking about time

Images or references to time permeate almost every scene of Macbeth. This preoccupation is linked to Shakespeare’s focus on ambiguity or equivocation (see the History Box ‘Equivocation and the Gunpowder Plot’ on page 62). In fact, the word ‘time’ or ‘times’ occurs 47 times in the course of the play.

In the opening scene, the Witches establish this focus by asking, ‘When shall we three meet again?’ and by giving the ambiguous answer: ‘When the hurly-burly’s done, / When the battle’s lost and won’ (repeating the word ‘when’ three times in the opening four lines).

Throughout Act 1, before the murder of King Duncan, much of the Macbeths’ dialogue centres on the passage of time, in phrases such as ‘the seeds of time’ (Scene 3, line 59) and ‘the coming on of time’ (Scene 5, lines 7–8). Macbeth also focuses our attention on contrasts between the present and the future, between the ‘done’ and the ‘undone’ (Scene 5, line 22; and Scene 7, lines 1–2).

Lady Macbeth urges her husband to kill King Duncan as soon as possible. In Act 1 Scene 5, she feels ‘now / The future in the instant’ (lines 54–55) and pleads with her husband: ‘To beguile the time. / Look like the time ... Look like th’ innocent flower, / But be the serpent under’t’ (lines 60–63).

After the night of King Duncan’s murder, when time seems to have stood still, Macbeth as ‘master of his time’ (Act 3 Scene 1, line 40) sees no gap between his thoughts and his actions: ‘From this moment / The very firstlings of my heart shall be / The firstlings of my hand’ (Act 4 Scene 1, lines 146–48). Subsequently, without hesitation he mercilessly slaughters all who oppose him.

As you read the rest of the play, watch out for further references to time, including:

- Macbeth’s response to the death of his wife (Act 5 Scene 5, lines 17–28) shows his feeling that time passes in a meaningless fashion.
- Macduff’s pronouncement that ‘the time is free’ (Act 5 Scene 9, line 21), coupled with Malcolm’s concluding words, reinforce the notion that order has been restored to Scotland.
Thinking about restoring Scotland to good health

In another of Shakespeare’s plays, *Hamlet*, Denmark is ruled by a corrupt King Claudius. As a result of his corruption, the whole of Denmark is morally contaminated and one of the minor characters, Marcellus, aptly observes, ‘Something is rotten in the state of Denmark’. The same can be said for Scotland under the rule of Macbeth.

On page 58, we introduced the notion of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth’s base emotion of ambition. Their corrupting influence spreads throughout Scotland like poison or a disease, and ultimately results in tragedy. Throughout *Macbeth*, Shakespeare effectively uses images of sickness and infection to convey the state of chaos or disorder in Scotland that stems from Macbeth and Lady Macbeth’s unbridled ambition.

**Evidence of chaos / disorder**
The opening scenes of *Macbeth* present a number of elements of chaos or disorder:

- Scotland is embroiled in civil war
- the country has also been invaded by Norway
- the first characters onstage are Witches
- the play opens with thunder and lightning
- more abnormal weather persists throughout the play.

These unnatural elements are further reinforced by:

- Lady Macbeth’s unnatural lack of feminine qualities (Act 1 Scenes 5 and 7)
- the presence of more storms, abnormal darkness and strange, violent animal behaviour (Act 2 Scene 4, lines 1–18)
- the appearance of Banquo’s Ghost (Act 3 Scene 4)
- Lady Macbeth’s descent into madness and sleepwalking – ‘a great perturbation of nature’ (Act 5 Scene 1, line 7).

**Disease / Infection**

Q What sort of disease, wound or infection is mentioned in the following textual references?
- a) Act 3 Scene 2, line 46
- b) Act 4 Scene 3, lines 40 and 104
- c) Act 5 Scene 1, lines 44 and 55

**Healing / Cure**

Q If Macbeth is the source of the ‘disease’ infecting Scotland, then:
- a) What seems to be the ‘cure’ or ‘medicine’ for the sickness (4.3.213–15; 4.3.238–39; 5.1.44; 5.2.27–29)?
- b) How is the King of England (Edward the Confessor) presented as a positive contrast to Macbeth (4.3.141–56)?
- c) How is it ironic that Macbeth commands the Doctor not only to cure his wife, but to ‘purge’ Scotland of the English (5.3.39–45, 50–56)?

**Scotland is restored**
The following scene (Act 5 Scene 9) sees Scotland beginning to be restored to a state of order, having been healed of its ‘disease’ – *Macbeth*. See the Extend question on page 150 for a more in-depth look at this.
My way of life is fall’n into the sear …

Macbeth as tragedy

What we now call the First Folio was published in 1623, a thick book entitled Mr William Shakespeare’s Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies. Macbeth was included in the section marked Tragedies, along with such famous plays as Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet, Othello and King Lear. The book does not offer a definition of tragedy: many of the history plays include tragic elements; many of the tragedies, such as Macbeth, include plenty of historical detail; and all of Shakespeare’s plays have some comic elements. So, what did the editors mean by tragedy?

The term tragedy generally suggests an unhappy ending, while comedy suggests a happy ending. It could be argued that Macbeth ends happily – a tyrannical ruler is killed, allowing peace and order to be restored to Scotland – but the play does not end happily for the protagonist, Macbeth. At the beginning of the play, Macbeth seems in a highly desirable position, but then Shakespeare charts his moral, spiritual and material downfall. Therefore, this interpretation of tragedy is perhaps not entirely applicable to Shakespeare’s Macbeth.

The term tragedy was first used in ancient Greece. The Greek philosopher Aristotle asserted the following things about tragedy in his work Poetics:

1. It should be serious and dignified, and written in a language more elevated than everyday speech.
2. It should focus on a hero or heroes, usually distinguished by their rank or ability.
3. The tragic hero should make some error in action, causing suffering for himself and those around him.
4. The tragic hero should arrive at some sort of profound moment of recognition, which Aristotle called anagnorisis.
5. The audience should feel sympathy for this tragic hero.
6. Tragedy should evoke feelings of pity and fear, leading the audience to question their assumptions about human experience and finally bringing about a release from tension (catharsis).
**Shakespeare’s language**

Shakespeare has an incredible command of language. His lines are packed with puns, metaphors and ironies. He often uses difficult, strange-sounding words and phrases, some of which have shifted in their meaning since he first wrote them. Sometimes he uses a different word order to what you might be used to, and the characters in his plays often speak in poetry. Shakespeare’s language can, at times, be challenging, but the reward is in the challenge.

Below are some tips on how to read the text and some of the main features to look out for. Don’t worry too much at first about terms like **iambic pentameter** and **rhyming couplet**. At this stage, practise reading the text aloud and enjoy the sound of the language.

**Tips for reading**

It is vital that you don’t pause at the end of a line if a thought or an idea continues on to the next line. The following example from *Macbeth* illustrates our point. Try reading it aloud, pausing at the end of each line.

*Context: Macbeth is agonising over whether or not he should kill King Duncan, and is weighing up the possible consequences of doing so.*

**MACBETH**

If it were done when 'tis done, then 'twere well
It were done quickly. If the assassination
Could trammel up the consequence, and catch
With his surcease success, that but this blow
Might be the be-all and the end-all here …

(Act 1 Scene 7)

The most natural place in these lines to pause is where you see a punctuation mark such as a comma (,) or full stop (.). In this case, you should not pause after ‘well’ or ‘assassination’ or ‘catch’ or ‘blow’. Instead, the natural places to pause are at the full stop after ‘quickly’ and at the comma after ‘done’, ‘consequence’ and ‘success’. Read the lines again, this time pausing at punctuation marks rather than at the end of each line. You will notice now that the lines flow much more smoothly and that the meaning of the lines is clearer. You should pause for a little longer after ‘quickly’ than ‘success’, as a full stop requires a little longer breath than a
The key point to remember is only to pause in your reading at punctuation marks, the same way you would when reading a novel.

At this stage, you might like to turn to page 47 and try reading all of Act 1 Scene 7, lines 1–28. This is one of Macbeth’s best-known soliloquies and is the extended version of the lines that appear above. When you read it, put into practice what you have just learned about reading and punctuation.

The dash

In this edition of Shakespeare’s Macbeth, the dash (—) is a specific punctuation mark. We use it to indicate interruptions to the flow of conversation in several ways.

a Alternating between speaking to one character and another

[Context: Macbeth is calling out for his arm-bearer. Seyton, while at the same time is talking to himself about the situation in which he finds himself.]

MACBETH

Seyton! — I am sick at heart,
When I behold — Seyton, I say! — This push
Will cheer me ever, or dissent me now. (Act 5 Scene 3)

b Becoming sidetracked during a conversation

[Context: While Lady Macbeth is thinking aloud about how she dragged the King’s guards, she becomes sidetracked by a noise that she hears. This is indicated by the dash (—) in the text.]

LADY MACBETH

That which hath made them drunk hath made me bold;
What hath quenched them hath giv’n me fire — Hark! — Peace!
It was the owl that shrieked, the fatal bellman … (Act 2 Scene 2)

c Interrupting another character’s dialogue

[Context: Macbeth’s servant is trying to explain that there are ten thousand soldiers advancing toward them, but Macbeth interrupts his explanation by beckoning him. This interruption is indicated by the dash in the text.]

SERVANT

There is ten thousand —

MACBETH

Greese, villain? (Act 5 Scene 3)

SERVANT

Soldiers, sir. (Act 5 Scene 3)

You will be able to tell what the dash (—) in the text is indicating by the context of the characters’ dialogue. In all cases in this edition of Macbeth, it signals an interruption of some sort.

Language features

a Blank verse and iambic pentameter

Most playwrights of Shakespeare’s time wrote their plays in blank verse, which is a type of poetry that does not necessarily rhyme. For example:

MACBETH

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
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing. (Act 5 Scene 5)

Set out like a poem (verse) rather than a novel (prose), there is something else you might notice about these lines, particularly the first few. Take a moment to read them aloud. Can you hear the rhythm in the words? Read the lines aloud once more. Can you hear the regular heartbeat repeating itself in each line?

to-DUM, to-DUM, to-DUM, to-DUM, to-DUM, to-DUM ...

The general rule in Shakespeare’s plays is to have ten beats per line, divided into what are called iambics. Each iamb contains one unstressed beat and one stressed beat (to-DUM). As each line has five iambics, this forms what is called iambic pentameter (‘penta’ relates to a group of five, as in pentagon, a five-sided shape).

This pattern is made clearer below, where the CAPITALISED letters are a stressed or strong beat. They should be emphasised a little more than the weaker beats:

LADY MACBETH

But SCREW your COURage TO the STICKing PLACE (Act 1 Scene 7)

Not only does Shakespeare’s iambic pentameter (five to-DUMs per line) work across words (as in ‘Did NOT you SPEAK?’) and within words (‘deSCEND?’), but also across speakers:

LADY MACBETH

Did NOT you SPEAK?

MACBETH

Now What?

LADY MACBETH

As I deSCENDed? (Act 2 Scene 2)

In the lines above, Macbeth and Lady Macbeth’s conversation continues the iambic pentameter uninterrupted. This is shown in the text by indenting the characters’ lines. Those reading Lady Macbeth and Macbeth’s parts should speak immediately after each other to complete the rhythm of the line. In this way, the heart of the play does not stop beating.

You will not necessarily be able to pick this rhythm straight away, but the more you read Shakespeare, the more you will develop a feel for iambic pentameter.

Having said this, the rhythm is often quite irregular in Macbeth. especially in comparison to Shakespeare’s earlier plays such as Romeo and Juliet and Richard III.

b Prose

While most of Shakespeare’s plays are written in verse (poetry), he sometimes chooses to have his characters speak in prose. This is the sort of
d Contraction and accents
Shakespeare frequently uses contractions in order to preserve the rhythm of iambic pentameter. Contractions are shortened words: You use contractions every day, such as don’t (short for do not) and haven’t (have not). In each of these examples, an apostrophe indicates that something is missing, and the word has been shortened:

- ’tis (it is); giv’n (given); o’er (over); know’st (knowest)

At other times, Shakespeare adds a syllable or a beat to a word to make it fit the iambic pentameter. This is indicated in the text by an accent mark to make an extra syllable:

- cursed [CURSED] (two beats instead of one)
- reserved [re-SERVED] (three beats instead of two)

e Rhyme
When Shakespeare writes in rhyming verse, it is always for a reason. Throughout Macbeth, you should immediately notice that the Witches speak differently from the other characters: they speak in rhyming verse and not in iambic pentameter. Here is an example:

2nd WITCH  By the pricking of my thumbs,
           Something wicked this way comes.
           Open, locks,
           Whoever knocks!  (Act 4 Scene 1)

The Witches go about deliberately seeking to create havoc; their language emphasizes their unnatural, even supernatural, features.

Sometimes, Shakespeare ends a scene with a rhyming couplet (two consecutive lines that rhyme). For example:

MACBETH  It is concluded: Banquo, thy soul’s flight,
        If it find heav’n, must find it out tonight.  (Act 3 Scene 1)

Ending a scene with a rhyming couplet helped the audience know that they could fidget a little; it also might have been a cue to the actors that they were soon due onstage for the next scene. Structurally, it ties up a speech neatly and makes a point memorable.