
NOT BORING MEDIA

THE MAN WHO MEMORIZED THE COMPLETE WORKS OF SHAKESPEARE

High-Interest Nonfiction Reading Passage

WHAT'S INCLUDED

- ✓ Reading Passage
- ✓ Comprehension Questions
- ✓ Answer Key
- ✓ Teacher Guide

GRADES 4-6 • LEXILE ~750L • DOK LEVELS 1-4

Reading they'll actually do.

TERMS OF USE

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WHAT'S INCLUDED

- ✓ High-interest nonfiction reading passage (300-400 words)
- ✓ 6 comprehension questions spanning DOK levels 1-4
- ✓ Complete answer key with explanations
- ✓ Teacher guide with standards, pacing, and extensions

Questions or feedback? Leave a review or message us through TPT!

THE MAN WHO MEMORIZED THE COMPLETE WORKS OF SHAKESPEARE

British actor Mark Rylance possesses a remarkable ability that seems almost impossible in the modern age: he can recite the complete works of William Shakespeare entirely from memory. This includes over 884,000 words comprising all 37 plays, 154 sonnets, and several longer poems. The accomplishment took decades to achieve and demonstrates the extraordinary potential capacity of human memory that most of us never come close to developing.

Rylance began memorizing Shakespeare as a young actor in the 1980s, not through any deliberate plan to learn everything, but simply through the normal demands of his profession. He would thoroughly memorize each play he was cast in, learning not just his own character's lines but often the entire script for context and understanding. Over more than forty years of performing Shakespeare's works, play after play accumulated in his memory until he had absorbed the complete canon.

The memorization wasn't a conscious project at first. Rylance didn't set out to learn everything Shakespeare ever wrote. But professional actors must know their lines with absolute perfection, and Shakespeare's language—with its distinctive rhythm, vivid imagery, and profound emotional depth—proves particularly memorable once truly learned. The words seemed to stick in ways that ordinary text simply doesn't.

Memory researchers and cognitive scientists note that meaningful, well-structured content is dramatically easier to remember than random information. Shakespeare's verse contains built-in memory aids: regular rhythm and meter, rhyming patterns, recurring phrases and images. The emotional content of the dramatic scenes creates additional powerful mental hooks. Actors who physically embody characters also encode memories differently than people who only read text silently.

Rylance's achievement is exceptional but not entirely unprecedented. Ancient Greek performers memorized epic poems far longer than Shakespeare's complete works. Before widespread literacy made written records common, human memory was regularly trained to levels that modern people rarely achieve or even attempt.

The accomplishment raises interesting questions about memory in our digital age. When any fact is instantly searchable, why memorize anything? Rylance argues that memorized text becomes part of you in ways that looked-up information never can.

Word Count: 345 | Lexile: ~750L | Grades 4-6 | Source: Wham-O

COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

Name: _____ Date: _____

1 How many words are in Shakespeare's complete works?

- ☐ A) 88,400
- ☐ B) 184,000
- ☐ C) Over 884,000
- ☐ D) 8.8 million

2 Over how many years did Rylance accumulate this?

- ☐ A) 4 years
- ☐ B) 14 years
- ☐ C) 40 years
- ☐ D) 400 years

3 Why is Shakespeare's text particularly memorable?

- ☐ A) It's short
- ☐ B) Rhythm, rhyme, and emotional content create memory aids
- ☐ C) It's modern English
- ☐ D) It's simple

4 How did Rylance's memorization happen?

- ☐ A) Planned from the start
- ☐ B) Accumulated gradually through performances
- ☐ C) Used a computer
- ☐ D) Born with it

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What comparison is made to ancient times?

- ☐ A) Ancient people couldn't read
- ☐ B) Greeks memorized longer works; memory was more developed pre-digital
- ☐ C) Shakespeare copied Greeks
- ☐ D) Ancient plays were shorter

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What argument does Rylance make about memorization?

- ☐ A) It's pointless now
- ☐ B) Memorized content becomes part of you in ways searched information cannot
- ☐ C) Everyone should memorize Shakespeare
- ☐ D) Digital storage is better

ANSWER KEY

The Man Who Memorized the Complete Works of Shakespeare

1. C) Over 884,000

DOK 1 — Recall.

2. C) 40 years

DOK 1 — Recall.

3. B) Rhythm, rhyme, and emotional content create memory aids

DOK 2 — Inference.

4. B) Accumulated gradually through performances

DOK 2 — Inference.

5. B) Greeks memorized longer works; memory was more developed pre-digital

DOK 3 — Analysis.

6. B) Memorized content becomes part of you in ways searched information cannot

DOK 4 — Extended Thinking.

TEACHER GUIDE

The Man Who Memorized the Complete Works of Shakespeare

STANDARDS ALIGNMENT

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.4.1 — Refer to details and examples in a text
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.4 — Determine meaning of words and phrases
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RI.5.8 — Explain how author uses evidence
- C3 Framework — Historical thinking skills

PACING OPTIONS

- Quick Read (10-15 min): Passage + questions 1-4
- Standard (20-25 min): Full passage + all questions
- Deep Dive (35-40 min): Add discussion + extension

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- In the age of Google, is memorization still valuable? When and why?
- What have humans lost as we've outsourced memory to technology?
- What would you want to memorize if you had Rylance's capacity?

EXTENSION ACTIVITIES

- Memorize a sonnet or short passage and reflect on the process.
- Research ancient memory techniques like the 'memory palace.'
- Calculate how long it would take to read Shakespeare's complete works aloud.

DIFFERENTIATION

- Struggling: Pre-teach vocabulary, partner reading
- Advanced: Add research, compare to related events
- ELL: Visual supports, pre-teach context

SOURCE

- Wham-O / Disc Golf Association