

SHAKESPEARE'S LANGUAGE

Keys To Understand It

Stuart Griffiths



Pontcanna Press UK

Pontcanna Press UK,

This book is published primarily as an electronic document, to be down-loaded from the Internet.

Copyright © Stuart Griffiths 2000.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without prior permission from the copyright owner and the publisher.

The right of Stuart Griffiths to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by him in accordance with the Copyright, Designs, and Patents Act 1988.

First published 2000. Pontcanna Press UK.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-0-9533476-0-5

www.pontcanna.com

www.pontcanna.co.uk

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

My intention is that anyone who reads carefully through the book will be able to understand better the language of any Shakespeare play.

By Shakespeare's language I mean the way he framed and built his sentences. Individual words of any play will still need to be looked up in a glossary, the number depending on the reader.

Committing to memory one or two of the quotations in each section should also help to achieve the desired result.

I have concentrated on the main sentence forms which emerge again and again when we read or listen to a Shakespeare play.

There are of course other forms, lesser forms, and those frequent occasions when Shakespeare deliberately broke the rules for his own literary and dramatic purposes. These I have not dealt with.

A knowledge of the main lines, without the branch lines, should be sufficient.

* * *

I begin with an account of the reasoning and the research behind the book.

There will be much talk of Grammar and Latin. These can present difficulties to the reader, but I have tried to minimise them.

There are only about half a dozen Latin words in the account; these have their English translations alongside.

The simplest way to think of Grammar is that it is the study of how a sentence is formed, the way it is put together, the way it is built.

CONTENTS

How to use this book	1
THE BACKGROUND	3
An explanation of the thinking behind the book, the research involved, and the book's purpose.	
THE QUOTATIONS	27
Representative quotations from Shakespeare, and his sources. These are the main sentence forms which emerge constantly when we see or read one of his plays.	
The Infinitive: TO	
a) The Infinitive of Purpose	29
b) The Infinitive used as a Noun	38
c) The Infinitive: other forms	44
The Conditional Sentence:	
IF with a Command	47
The Command form LET	51
The Mood of Wishing:	
WOULD meaning WISH	54
The Conditional Sentence:	
IF with WOULD or SHOULD	58
The Conditional Sentence:	
IF with COULD or MAY	62
The Conditional Sentence:	
IF with WILL or SHALL	64
Sentences expressing a Result: SO . . . THAT	67
Sentences expressing Purpose: THAT . . . MAY	73
Sentences expressing Preference and Comparison: THAN	79

The Present Participle: –ING	84
Also: the adjective form; the self-contained phrase; the verbal noun.	
The Past Participle: –D	97
The Impersonal Verb: IT	101
Manner: AS	104
WHAT	107
THAT WHICH	110
THE ORDER OF WORDS	113
Verb emphasis; noun emphasis; prepositions; adjectives; balance, symmetry, antithesis; long sentences.	
THE STORY CONTINUED	135
Representative quotations from other great writers: Marlowe, Ben Jonson, Bacon, Milton, Bunyan, Dryden, Pope, Swift, Dr Johnson, Gibbon, Macaulay, Wordsworth. Also examples from great oratory.	
CONCLUSION	145

THE BACKGROUND

Children and adults often have difficulty in understanding Shakespeare's language. This is not primarily due to the intermittent archaic words, or to words which have changed their meaning. It is due mainly to Shakespeare's grammar.

In fact, Shakespeare's grammar, viewed in its entirety, is wonderfully precise. It has however a strong Latin base, and this can deter people.

The sixteenth century Elizabethan Grammar School lived up to its name. It gave its pupils a rigorous training in Latin grammar. It consolidated this with a comprehensive study of Roman rhetoric, poetry, drama, moral philosophy, and history.

The work was suitably intensive for a time when Latin was the second language of all educated people. From the age of six to fourteen, or older, pupils studied Latin for ten hours a day, six days a week, most weeks of the year.

The most important book in this whole course of study was the Latin Grammar of Erasmus, Lily and Colet. It may not, like Ovid, have inspired Shakespeare's great poetry, or, like Cicero, his blazing rhetoric. It *did* provide the framework and the building bricks of his sentences. It is therefore a work of the highest significance.

The Latin Grammar of Erasmus, Lily and Colet

In the early part of the sixteenth century in England, a widespread need existed for a co-ordinated and unified Latin Grammar for use in all schools. This need was answered by the great European humanist and scholar Erasmus, and two distinguished English schoolmasters, Lily and Colet. Their work was finally completed by 1540. Although it had no author on the title page, it came to be known as Lily's Latin Grammar.

It lasted for three centuries, and it gave the elements of Latin Grammar to every English schoolboy from Shakespeare to Gladstone.

It was exported overseas, to Europe and America. It very likely formed part of the school education of the American founding fathers.

Lily's Latin Grammar did not change much during its 300 years of continuous use. The major change was that the second part, in which the instructions were in Latin, was translated into English in the

eighteenth century. The first part was always in English.

The book was eventually replaced by new Latin Grammars which began to appear about the middle of the nineteenth century.

The hard evidence is that Shakespeare knew Lily's Latin Grammar well. A conclusive number of quotations from it, and frequent references, direct and indirect, can be found in the plays themselves – including a whole scene in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (Act 4, Scene 1). Numerous scholars have acknowledged Shakespeare's familiarity with it. It can be taken as established fact.

After six more pages the background essay continues . . .

Text appears here in the complete book.

Mark Antony's Oration

Shakespeare refers to Cicero's rhetorical treatise "Orator" in Titus Andronicus, though it was not one of the leading rhetorical manuals of Cicero studied in Elizabethan grammar schools. But "Orator" was certainly available for study.

It is a very readable essay on the art of oratory. In particular, it contains an impressive passage which fires off about forty oratorical techniques in a few pages. Significantly, these are all quoted by Quintilian. (A leading Roman teacher of Rhetoric.)

It can be no accident, I think, that several of these parallel the cunning techniques of Shakespeare's Mark Antony at Caesar's funeral. Cicero lists the following among his oratorical tips.

Cicero: *"The orator will say something, but desire to have it understood in the opposite sense."*

Antony: "For Brutus is an honourable man;
So are they all, all honourable men . . ."

Cicero: *“He will introduce the same words repeatedly, or with slight changes.”*
“He will urge his point by asking questions, and will reply to himself as if to questions.”

Antony: “Yet Brutus says he was ambitious,
And Brutus is an honourable man.
You all did see that on the Lupercal
I thrice presented him a kingly crown,
Which he did thrice refuse. Was this ambition?
Yet Brutus says he was ambitious,
And sure he is an honourable man.”

Cicero: *“He will say that there are certain things of which he prefers not to speak.”*

Antony: “Let but the commons hear this testament,
Which, pardon me, I do not mean to read . . .”

Cicero: *“He will make mute objects speak.”*

Antony: “(I) show you sweet Caesar's wounds, poor poor
dumb mouths,
And bid them speak for me.” etc.

Cicero: *“He will turn from the subject and divert the thought . . . he will bring himself back to the subject.”*

Antony: “You have forgot the will I told you of.”

Cicero: *“He will make the scene live before their eyes.”*
“He will divide a sentence, giving part to a description of one person, part to another.”

Antony: “You all do know this mantle. I remember
The first time ever Caesar put it on;
'Twas on a summer's evening in his tent,
That day he overcame the Nervii.

Look, in this place ran Cassius' dagger through;
See what a rent the envious Casca made;
Through this, the well-beloved Brutus stabbed,
And as he plucked his cursed steel away,
Mark how the blood of Caesar followed it . . .”

Cicero: *“His language will often have a significance deeper than his actual words.”*

This applies to the whole of Antony's oration.

If Shakespeare did have Cicero's help in constructing Antony's oration, he would have appreciated the sombre historical irony that Antony ordered Cicero's death.

I have not seen the above connections made elsewhere. They are from my own observations.

Sentences beginning with IF

The pages of Cicero's rhetorical manuals are peppered with Conditional sentences. The IF sentence was an essential technique in the armoury of Roman advocates and politicians.

Much of the Conditional sentence technique discussed by Cicero was in fact used by the Greeks before him, and he states this. Nonetheless it was Cicero's account and interpretation of the older technique that was studied in Latin in Elizabethan grammar schools.

The technique has continued down to modern times. One of the most effective uses of it occurred during the Suez Crisis of 1956, when the great Labour orator Aneurin Bevan addressed a mass rally in Trafalgar Square. He attacked the Prime Minister, Eden, for his specious justification for the Anglo-French invasion of Suez:

“If Sir Anthony Eden is sincere in what he is saying . . . and he may be (laughter) . . . he may be . . . If he is sincere in what he is saying . . . then he is too *stupid* to be a Prime Minister!” (great laughter).

From Socrates to Cicero, from Shakespeare to Kipling, from Pitt to Gladstone to Bevan . . .

As Touchstone says in his satire on the technique in *As You Like It*: “Much virtue in IF”.

Background essay continues for two more pages . . .

Ovid's Metamorphoses and Golding's translation

Excerpt from this three-page section:

It is as if Shakespeare had filled whole notebooks with words and phrases from Golding which took his fancy. (Golding's Ovid is a lengthy work: 300 pages, with 50 long lines on each page.) Sometimes he minted them into better phrases, sometimes he used them as he found them. Either way, they were integrated seamlessly into his speeches and dialogue, and were always apt.

Not only Shakespeare: Milton used Golding's Ovid, and Christopher Marlowe. One of Marlowe's most famous phrases, "Ye pampered jades of Asia!", thundered by Tamburlaine, came from "the pampered jades of Thrace" in Golding. In the twentieth century, Ezra Pound was a great admirer of Golding; and words and phrases from Golding can be seen in the work of Pound's then pupil, T.S. Eliot.

If Shakespeare used Golding as a kind of English poetic dictionary, in an age before dictionaries, as we know them, came into being, he is not blameworthy. Although Shakespeare was literature's greatest magpie, he was also its greatest alchemist. We may forgive his imperial sequestrations. He too dealt in metamorphoses. He took lead and turned it into silver; he took silver and made it into gold; he took gold (or Golding) and transformed it into sapphires and diamonds.

Background essay continues for two more pages . . .

Text appears here in the complete book.

The importance of Grammar

Until recent times, the importance of Grammar was not in question. For many centuries before Lily's Latin Grammar was compiled, and long afterwards, Grammar was regarded as the foundation of knowledge. Without it, nothing else was possible.

A woodcut is printed at the start of Lily's Grammar, showing a kind

of Forest of Arden with, at the centre, a schoolmaster and pupils gathering authorised fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. Though it is not labelled as such, the trunk of the tree clearly represents Grammar. An unsigned Preface in later editions of Lily's Grammar emphasises its sovereign place in the scheme of things:

“Grammar is the sacristan that bears the key of Knowledge, by whom admittance can be had into the Temple of the Muses, and the treasures of the Arts; even whatever can enrich the mind, and raise it from the level of a barbarian to the dignity of an Intelligence.”

It goes on to stress the importance of learning Latin Grammar at an early age. This certainly meant before the age of ten. Latin Grammar was drilled into Elizabethan schoolboys like the multiplication tables of later centuries. It was not forgotten. It was etched indelibly on the mind.

It thus provided the framework and the building bricks of Shakespeare's sentences. Poetic and dramatic genius supplied the rest, but his precise grammar is always visible and audible. For him, as with other great English writers to follow, Lily's Latin Grammar furnished the germ of a great eloquence.

A relevant tradition

Excerpt from this two-page section . . .

Text appears here in the complete book.

We are talking here about how he built his sentences; and there is no doubt that his thought, feeling and poetry blend easily with his grammar in a happy, unjarring fluency and harmony.

Many of his finest lines are, in fact, the direct result of his grammatical precision. Examples can be seen in the Shakespeare quotations of this book or on any page of his work, but here is another:

the embattled Macbeth is told of his wife's death.

“She should have died hereafter.

There would have been a time for such a word.”

Macbeth.

The accuracy of the tenses and the use of the word “hereafter” come straight from the Short Introduction. Yet these are resonant, compelling lines, which lead into one of Shakespeare's greatest speeches: “Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow.”

It may also be worth noting, in view of the way the speech continues, that the phrase “the last syllable” appears early in the Short Introduction, and is also prominent in the section on Prosody.

The greater the play, in fact, the more impressive its grammar. The grammar of King Lear is like the play itself – ironclad. It evokes indestructible images: gnarled oak, rock, bronze.

None of this can be described as a man showing off his grammatical expertise. It is more that of a man who has grammatical accuracy ingrained in his thinking, and permanently at his finger-tips. Shakespeare's grammar can be likened to a superbly tooled piece of precision engineering.

Background essay continues for seven more pages . . .

Note: The Short Introduction is Part I of Lily's Latin Grammar.

Conclusion

The main effect of Lily's Latin Grammar, however, was, in Dr Johnson's words (it cannot be quoted too often), to grammaticise Shakespeare's English.

The Short Introduction in particular clarifies Shakespeare's language for us in a startling way. Two comparisons come to mind. One is the scientific restoration of an old master, showing it as it was first painted. The other is planetary: a star four hundred light years away, which illuminates Shakespeare's language, today and in perpetuity.

The mighty work of Erasmus, and his brilliant lieutenants, Lily and Colet, lives still.

* * *

Background essay ends.

THE QUOTATIONS

Now follows my system of keys to the understanding of Shakespeare's language, i.e. the structure of his sentences.

It consists almost entirely of quotations. I have chosen them as representative examples. I believe they speak for themselves.

Key words in each quotation are printed in bold type.

The Infinitive: TO

The Infinitive expressing Purpose

i.e. an aim, intention or objective.

I come **to bury** Caesar, not **to praise** him.

Julius Caesar.

They sell the pasture now **to buy** the horse.

Henry V.

And we'll strive **to please** you every day.

Twelfth Night.

We go **to gain** a little patch of ground . . .

Hamlet.

You rise **to play** and go to bed **to work**.

Othello.

We were not born **to sue**, but **to command**.

Richard II.

I go **to take** my stand,
To see him pass on to the Capitol.

Julius Caesar.

Now spurs the lated (late) traveller apace
To gain the timely inn.

Macbeth.

(Clarifying words are in brackets.)

But indeed, sir, we make holiday **to see**
Caesar, and **to rejoice** in his triumph.

Julius Caesar.

Do you not come your tardy son **to chide** . . . ?

Hamlet.

To mitigate the scorn he gives his uncle
He prettily and aptly taunts himself.

Richard III.

. . . He hath a wisdom that doth guide his valour
To act in safety.

Macbeth.

Examples continue for two more pages.

And oftentimes (often), **to win** us to our harm,
The instruments of darkness tell us truths;
Win us with honest trifles, **to betray**'s (us)
In deepest consequence.

Macbeth.

The Infinitive expressing Purpose **Shakespeare's sources: examples**

I go **to visit**.
I go **to see**.
I go **to love**.

Lily's Latin Grammar.

Note: Lily's Latin Grammar was the standard textbook of Latin Grammar used in English schools for three hundred years: 1550 to 1850. There are many references, direct and indirect, to Lily's Latin Grammar in Shakespeare's plays. (Some information in The Background will be repeated in this section.)

Eat **to live**, not live **to eat**.

Ancient saying, quoted by Cicero.

If you wish **to please** your master, use diligence.

Lily's Latin Grammar.

And God made two great lights; the greater light **to rule** the day, and the lesser light **to rule** the night: he made the stars also. And God set them in the

firmament of the heaven **to give** light upon the earth,
and **to rule** over the day and over the night, and **to divide**
the light from the darkness: and God saw that it was
good.

*Genesis. Sixteenth century
English Bibles.*

Note: The sixteenth century English Bibles had a considerable influence on Shakespeare's language. They did not differ greatly from the later King James Bible, which is still in use today. The sentence structure is identical.

I came not **to judge** the world, but **to save** the world.

John. The Bible.

The Lord hath sent me **to bind up** the broken-hearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives, . . . **to comfort** all that
mourn.

Isaiah. The Bible.

God commanded the seas **to swell** with every blast of wind,
and with their waves **to beat** upon the shore of the earth.

He did command the plain **to stretch out** wide . . . and
stone hills **to lift** themselves on high.

*Ovid's Metamorphoses.
Golding's translation (1567).
The title means 'Transformations',
and refers to classical myths
involving miraculous changes.*

Examples in this section continue for three more pages . . .

The Infinitive: TO

The Infinitive used as a Noun

It is often the subject of IS. It often includes other words.

To show an unfelt sorrow is an office
Which the false man does easy (easily).

Macbeth.

To have done is **to hang**
Quite out of fashion, like a rusty mail
In monumental mockery.

Troilus and Cressida.

Oh, it is excellent
To have a giant's strength, but it is tyrannous
To use it like a giant.

Measure for Measure.

To alter favour (countenance) ever is **to fear**.

Macbeth.

If all the year were playing holidays,
To sport would be as tedious as **to work**.

Henry IV. Pt.I.

Examples continue after a further page . . .

'Tis not in thee (It is not in your nature)
To grudge my pleasures, **to cut off** my train,
To bandy hasty words . . .

King Lear.

To fly the boar before the boar pursues
Were **to incense** the boar to follow us . . .

Richard III.

Let's grant it is not
Amiss **to tumble** on the bed of Ptolemy (Cleopatra),
To give a Kingdom for a mirth . . .
To reel the streets at noon . . .

Antony and Cleopatra.

Ay, but **to die**, and **(to) go** we know not where,
To lie in cold obstruction (stiffness) and **to rot** . . .
To be imprisoned in the viewless winds,
And **(to be) blown** with restless violence round about
The pendent world . . . 'tis too horrible.

Measure for Measure.

To be, or **not to be** – that is the question;
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind **to suffer**
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or **to take** arms against a sea of troubles
And by opposing **(to) end** them. **To die, to sleep** –
No more – and by a sleep **to say** we end
The heartache and the thousand natural shocks

That flesh is heir to. 'Tis a consummation
Devoutly **to be wished. To die, to sleep –**
To sleep – perchance to dream . . .

Hamlet.

The Infinitive used as a Noun **Shakespeare's sources: examples**

To rise betime (early) in the morning is a most
wholesome thing.

Lily's Latin Grammar.

To know much is the most pleasant life of all.

Lily's Latin Grammar.

It is the duty of a young man **to respect** his elders.

*Cicero, quoted in
Lily's Latin Grammar.*

It is the duty of Kings **to spare** the vanquished, and
to subdue the proud.

*Virgil, quoted in
Lily's Latin Grammar.*

Note: Virgil, Rome's greatest poet, was studied in Elizabethan
grammar schools.

Two more pages of examples follow in this section.

IF with a Command

If music be the food of love, **play** on.

Twelfth Night.

If you have tears, **prepare** to shed them now.

Julius Caesar.

If you do meet Horatio and Marcellus,
The rivals (partners) of my watch, **bid** them make haste.

Hamlet.

If thou hast any sound or use of voice,
Speak to me.
If there be any good thing to be done . . .
Speak to me.

Hamlet.

If you find him sad,
Say I am dancing; **if** in mirth, **report**
That I am sudden(ly) sick.

Antony and Cleopatra.

If thou didst ever hold me in thy heart,
Absent thee (keep away) from felicity awhile . . .

Hamlet.

If you will live, **lament**; **if** die, **be brief**.

Richard III.

If you will see a pageant truly played . . .
Go hence a little.

As You Like It.

If it be you that stirs these daughters' hearts
Against their father, **fool** me not so much
To bear it tamely.

King Lear.

If thou canst (If you can) love me for this, **take** me . . .

If thou would have such a one, **take** me . . .

Henry V.

If thou wilt needs damn thyself, **do** it a more delicate
way than drowning.

Othello.

If any man of quality or degree, within the lists of the army, will maintain upon Edmund, supposed Earl of Gloucester, that he is a manifold traitor, **let him appear** by the third sound of the trumpet.

King Lear.

IF with a Command
Shakespeare's sources: examples

If you wish to please your master, **use** diligence.

Lily's Latin Grammar.

If you are cruel, **say** no;
If you are not, **come** with me.

*A Roman love elegy, quoted in
Lily's Latin Grammar.*

Therefore, **if** thine enemy hunger, **feed** him;
if he thirst, **give** him drink.

Romans. The Bible.

Wherefore **if** thy hand or thy foot cause thee
to offend, **cut** them off . . .
And **if** thine eye cause thee to offend, **pluck** it out . . .

Matthew. The Bible.

A further page of examples follows in this section.

SO . . . THAT: Sentences expressing a RESULT

The sentence expresses a Result or Consequence.

I love France **so** well **that** I will not part with
a village of it.

Henry V.

This means: 'I love France so well that, as a result,
I will not part with a village of it.'

Henry the Sixth . . .
Whose state **so** many had the managing,
That they lost France, and made his England bleed.

Henry V.

His life was gentle, and the elements
So mixed in him, **that** Nature might stand up
And say to all the world, 'This was a man!'

Julius Caesar.

Blood and destruction shall be **so** in use,
And dreadful objects **so** familiar,
That mothers shall but smile when they behold
Their infants quartered with the hands of war . . .

Julius Caesar.

Examples continue after a further page . . .

And blest are those
Whose blood and judgement are **so** well commingled
That they are not a pipe for Fortune's finger
To sound what stop she please.

Hamlet.

Besides, this Duncan
Hath borne his faculties **so** meek, hath been
So clear (honourable) in his great office, **that** his virtues
Will plead like angels, trumpet-tongued against
The deep damnation of his taking-off (murder).

Macbeth.

Note also the use of SUCH:

There's **such** divinity doth hedge a King
That treason can . . .

(. . . do little against him.)

Hamlet.

SO . . . THAT: Sentences expressing a RESULT
Shakespeare's sources: examples

If you wish to please your master, use diligence; and
be not **so** slack **that** you shall need punishment.

Lily's Latin Grammar.

Let your light **so** shine before men, **that** they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven.

Matthew. The Bible.

God **so** loved the world, **that** he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.

John. The Bible.

Some citizens are **so** preoccupied with their own concerns, **that** they abandon those whom it is their duty to protect.

*Cicero: On Duties.
(Philosophical works.)*

It may be argued: While this war, by its nature, is **so** necessary **that** it must be waged, it is not **so** extensive **that** we need greatly fear it.

*Cicero: Oration on Pompey's generalship.
(De Imperio.)*

So great was his splendour in arms **that** the sun's brightness seemed dim by comparison.

*Cicero: Rhetorical works.
The Theory of Public Speaking.*

This section continues for two more pages.

Preference and Comparison: THAN

The usual form of sentence expressing Preference or Comparison is:

'Rather, more, better . . . THAN'.

A countenance **more** in sorrow **than** in anger.

Hamlet.

. . . I love
The name of honour **more than** I fear death.

Julius Caesar.

I **rather** tell thee what is to be feared
Than what I fear.

Julius Caesar.

I **rather** choose
To wrong the dead, to wrong myself and you,
Than I will wrong such honourable men.

Julius Caesar.

I am a man
More sinned against **than** sinning.

King Lear.

I had **rather** have this tongue cut from my mouth
Than it should do offence to Michael Cassio.

Othello.

. . . And makes us **rather** bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of.

Hamlet.

I thought the King had **more** affected (favoured) the Duke
of Albany **than** Cornwall.

King Lear.

Thou wert **better** in a grave **than** to answer with thy
uncovered body this extremity of the skies.

King Lear.

We will extenuate **rather than** enforce.

Antony and Cleopatra.

There are **more** things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.

Hamlet.

Another page of examples . . .

Preference and Comparison: THAN
Shakespeare's sources: examples

I had **rather** you were rich indeed, **than** so accounted.

Lily's Latin Grammar.

He is **more** sick in mind **than** in body.

Lily's Latin Grammar.

It is **better** to trust in the Lord, **than** to put any confidence in man.

It is **better** to trust in the Lord, **than** to put any confidence in princes.

Psalm 118.
Book of Common Prayer.

Is it not **better** to die bravely **than** to live in disgrace?

The Roman historian Sallust,
quoted in Lily's Latin Grammar.

I had **rather** have a husband without money, **than** money without a husband.

Terence, quoted in
Lily's Latin Grammar.

This section continues for another page.

THE ORDER OF WORDS

The expected order of words in a sentence is often rearranged by Shakespeare.

Verb emphasis

Verbs are often placed for emphasis at the beginning or end of the sentence or phrase.

Dismayed not this
Our captains, Macbeth and Banquo?

Macbeth.

. . . Iago knows
That she with Cassio hath the act of shame
A thousand times **committed**.

Othello.

Now **spurs** the lated traveller apace
To gain the timely inn.

Macbeth.

The weight of this sad time we must **obey**.

King Lear.

The castle of Macduff I will **surprise**.

Macbeth.

For them the gracious Duncan have I **murdered**.

Macbeth.

. . . And let the angel whom thou still hast served
Tell thee Macduff was from his mother's womb
Untimely **ripped**.

Macbeth.

Then shall our names,
Familiar in his mouth as household words,
Harry the King, Bedford and Exeter,
Warwick and Talbot, Salisbury and Gloucester,
Be in their flowing cups freshly **remembered**.

Henry V.

Repays he my deep service
With such contempt?

Richard III.

More examples from The Order of Words follow.

Balance and Symmetry

Balance and symmetry are important. The first half of a Shakespeare sentence is often nicely balanced by the second half (see previous quotations). The method can include parallel patterns of words, contrast, antithesis.

Things without all **remedy**
Should be without **regard**.

Macbeth.

'remedy' is set against 'regard'.

That which hath made them **drunk** hath made me **bold**.

Macbeth.

'drunk' is contrasted with 'bold'.

(These fiends . . .)
That **keep** the word of promise to our **ear**,
And **break** it to our **hope**.

Macbeth.

'keep' contrasts with 'break'; 'ear' with 'hope'.

Fair is **foul**, and foul is **fair**.

Macbeth.

So long as men can breathe or eyes can see,
So long lives this, and this gives life to thee.

Sonnet 18.

All **days** are **nights** to see till I see thee,
And **nights** bright **days** when dreams do show thee me.

Sonnet 43.

Thou art sworn
As **deeply** to **effect** what we **intend**
As **closely** to **conceal** what we **impart**.

Richard III.

Note how the words in one line are paralleled exactly by those in the line below it.

No, no, Orlando, men are **April** when they **woo**, **December**
when they **wed**; maids are **May** when they are **maids**, but the
sky changes when they are **wives**.

As You Like It.

More examples from The Order of Words . . .

Text appears here in the complete book.

Long Sentences

A) Where the main statement is held back until the end.

Thou art sworn, Eros,
That when the exigent (crisis point) should come, which now
Is come indeed, when I should see behind me
The inevitable prosecution of
Disgrace and horror, that on my command
Thou then wouldst kill me.

Antony and Cleopatra.

The sentence builds to: 'Thou then wouldst kill me'.

Had it pleased heaven
To try me with affliction, had they rained
All kind of sores and shames on my bare head,
Steeped me in poverty to the very lips,
Given to captivity me and my utmost hopes,
**I should have found in some place of my soul
A drop of patience.**

Othello.

More examples . . .

Long Sentences

B) Where the main statement comes at the beginning.

Macbeth does murder sleep – the innocent sleep,
Sleep that knits up the ravelled sleeve of care,
The death of each day's life, sore labour's bath,
Balm of hurt minds, great nature's second course,
Chief nourisher in life's feast.

Macbeth.

'Macbeth does murder sleep' is the main statement. The rest of the sentence flows from it.

(ravelled sleeve: tangled yarn.)

Then must you speak
Of one that loved not wisely, but too well;
Of one, not easily jealous, but, being wrought,
Perplexed in the extreme; of one whose hand
Like the base Indian threw a pearl away
Richer than all his tribe; of one whose subdued eyes,
Albeit unused to the melting mood,
Drop tears as fast as the Arabian trees
Their med'cinable gum.

Othello.

The main statement is highlighted.

More examples . . .

The Order of Words includes leading sources from Roman oratory.

The specimen pages from Shakespeare's Language: Keys To Understand It end here.