

## Study Guide Basics: Choices

In the American Shakespeare Center study guides and workshops, we frequently ask students and performers to consider the different choices they might make, given the clues within the text. The creation of character, whether fictional or real, results from “thought,” vocal, and physical choices. ASC Education encourages you to explore opportunities for choice within the texts of the plays as a means of helping your students to read the stage. The following options should come in handy when it comes time to play with the text on its feet. Begin by asking your students try them on, in unison or individually, then discuss how each affects audience perception of character and the student playing the choice.

### **Vocal Choices**

Because we place such value on the primacy of the language in early modern plays, the vocal delivery of those words carries great importance. Using the basics of everyday communication, keenly focused to Shakespeare’s words, and with an awareness of the clues presented by the rhythm and metrics of both verse and prose lines, your students will be able to explore a wide variety of vocal deliveries.

### **Basics:**

*Vary pitch.* Say the line in a higher or lower voice.

*Vary volume.* Whisper, shout, murmur, scream, etc.

*Vary pace.* Say the line faster or slower, perhaps take a pause or breath.

**Advanced:** These choices will be more accessible to your students after they have covered **Basics: Verse and Prose**, as these are choices presented by the rhythm or meter of a given line.

- **Pronunciation:** Scansion can help clue an actor in not only to correct pronunciation of unfamiliar words and names, but also to variations on common pronunciations.
  - Often in verse, suffixes may break into more syllables than we are used to in modern English. “Banished” can become “Ban-ish-ed,” “exclamation” can become “ex-cla-ma-ti-on.” These variations do not occur every time a word has one of these or other suffixes, but they may be present. Encourage your students to look for these opportunities if they are stuck on a line.
  - Too, words can be compressed, or “elided,” into fewer syllables. Compressed words will often solve a challenging scansion conundrum, and can provide clues about character (see speed).
- **Speed:** End-stops, elision, caesuras, enjambments, and irregularities provide information on the speed of delivery.
  - Stops, whether at the end of lines or in the middle of them, slow a speech down. They may not indicate full pauses, but they affect the cadence of speech nonetheless.
  - Enjambments (sentences which carry on through more than one line) create a sense of rushed speech, as one line moves on into the next. A speech with many enjambments or elisions may indicate a character in a hurry, experience a rush of emotion, or fast-talking another character.
  - Trochees at the beginning of a line often indicate a quick beginning, a “powering-through” , or attention-getting sensations.
- **Pronouns:** Pronouns do not usually fall in stressed positions, so when they do, Shakespeare is telling us something important.
  - If the pronoun is personal -- “you,” “I,” “mine,” “they” -- try to determine why the person indicated by the pronoun is so important to the speaker at that moment. Is he accusing? Threatening? Questioning? Asserting his status? Is he using the pronouns to assume either an

offensive or a defensive position in the conversation?

- If the pronoun is demonstrative -- “this” or “that” -- the pronoun indicates distance, and the stress calls significant attention to that distance. A “this” object or character is close, while a “that” object or character is far, across the stage, or perhaps not even on it. Ask your students to explore possible reasons for the character to stress the closeness (protection, ownership) or the distance (disgust, fear).
- *Articulation*: A character who speaks very precisely sounds different than a character who uses a lot of elisions and contractions. Ask your students to look at their lines and see if they have characters who speak precisely or who speak sloppily.
  - What causes someone to speak in a way that is overly-precise? Is the character trying to impress someone? Is it in a formal setting? Is she looking down on someone? What might precise speech indicate about rank?
  - Conversely, what causes someone to speak in a way that is sloppy or imprecise? Is the character ill-educated? Drunk? Dizzy? Encourage your students to explore the possible options when they see a character whose speech is habitually irregular.
- *Patterns, and Breaking Them*: Many characters speak predominantly in a certain way, and their patterns of speech provide many clues to an actor -- the scansion may indicate well-ordered thoughts, or very simple ones, or tangled complexities. If a character suddenly speaks in a way that is unusual for him or her, however, that can be a clue as well.
  - If a typically well-organized speaker suddenly has lines with a lot of caesuras, enjambments, trochees, or spondees, that indicates something about that moment. The speaker may be confused, overwrought, angry, or distracted, all of which are playable options for an actor.
  - Similarly, if a character whose speech is usually jumbled and broken suddenly has lines written in regular pentameter, that may indicate a moment of discovery or meaningful clarity.
  - Ask your students to examine the possible “why”s behind all of these departures from a character’s normal patterns.

### ***Physical Choices***

Over the centuries of performance, actors working together, with directors, and with coaches have developed several “languages” to describe the act of creating movement that appears to resonate with a character’s intent or state of mind. These languages are useful in exploration of play texts as a way of embodying, or physicalizing, the words on the page.

The following techniques offer a short-hand method for the communication of certain physical and mental choices. We recommend working as a group, in a circle or spread out in an empty room, if possible, to explore the connotation of each of the following. Then, try them attached to lines, pairing movement to some of the following lines from Shakespeare’s plays. Tell your students not to worry about the appropriate context of the lines right now; this exercise is meant to help them find all the different ways they can perform the same words.

#### Lines to Try

“When shall we three meet again?”

“Look like the innocent flower, but be the serpent under’t”

“Is this a dagger which I see before me?”

“Oh, full of scorpions is my mind”

“Hail, king! For so thou art”

**Basics:**

*Vary stance or posture.* Stand and move in a tall and straight manner, crouch, ground yourself (a steady stance with both feet in contact with the floor). Stand or move like someone of a different gender.

*Vary pace or gait.* Instead of walking, run (or skip, jump, hop, etc.). This is especially useful for entrances and exits. Decide whether movement is controlled and precise, or loose and relaxed; swift and direct, or halting and hesitant; easy or labored.

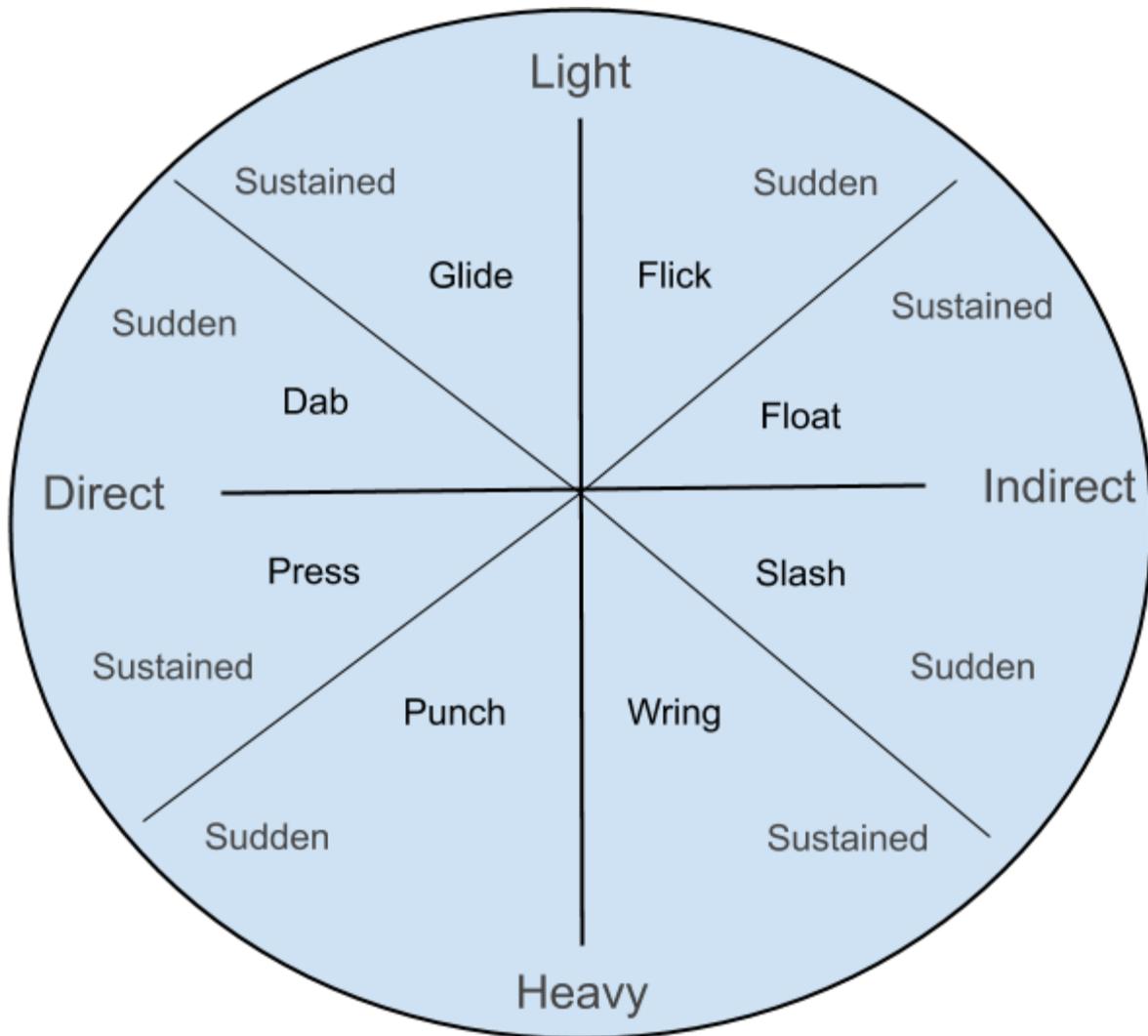
*Vary the leading\* body part.* For example the head, the chest, the left hand, etc. This body part could be important to the character or be related to their goals.

\*(place forward and/or highlight)

**Advanced:** The techniques described in the following pages are some of those that professional actors learn and utilize during the rehearsal process and in performances. Your students may find these methods helpful ways to approach the idea of physicalizing a certain emotion or nuance.

**LABAN**

Movement is rarely just one thing or another; all motion includes the confluence of different elements: speed, direction, focus, etc. In Laban, eight basic types of movement help players to meld the worlds of weight, intent, and speed. Think about what each of these looks like to you and try them on.



## HEAD, HEART, GUT, GROIN

Head, heart, gut, and groin are areas of the body that a line could “come from.” Which area to choose depends on the intentions of the line. A student can highlight the area by leading with it, changing the pitch, volumes, pace, etc.

Head: Head lines and characters are smart, logical, and possibly calculating. A head line could perhaps be more nasal and/or high pitched. Picking up the pace could mean the character is thinking at a mile-a-minute. Alternately slowing down could mean they are deliberating and considering.

Heart: Heart lines and characters are all about care of something (another character, a thing, a place). These lines are kind, warm, and emotional. Think about what the character cares about, then think about the state of that thing. What is happening to the cared-for-thing will inform whether the character is happy, sad, upset, etc. This, in turn, informs pace, volume, and pitch.

Gut: Gut lines and characters are action oriented and quick to anger. Lines from the gut should be louder and in a deeper voice. Stances that take up more room and/or are extremely stable are good for these characters.

Groin: Groin lines and characters manipulate others, they want something and will get it. These lines could be sexual in nature, but don't have to be. Slowing the pace of a line could indicate they are considering or plotting. Think about what the character desires then find ways to highlight this goal. For example, if the character wants to murder their scene partner they might rest their hand on their sword (or other weapon) and cock that hip out.

## **AUDIENCE/RELATIONSHIP CHOICES:**

Who is the character saying the line to? Their ostensible conversational partner, as indicated by the script, may not be the only receiver. Perhaps another scene partner is the target audience, or a member of the audience itself. See **Asides and Audience Contact** activities for more assistance.

These are all suggestions. Above all, the word “choice” is an invitation to experiment. Exploring the infinite variety of choices can give you new insight to a character that may not be immediately apparent from looking at the text alone.