What is Shakespeare prose? How does it differ to verse? The difference between them is central to understanding Shakespeare’s writing - but it is not as difficult as you might think.

Shakespeare moved between prose and verse in his writing to give his characters more depth and vary the overall rhythmic structure of his plays. His treatment of prose is as skillful as his verse.

What Is Shakespeare Prose?

Prose has:

- Run-on lines (unlike iambic pentameter)
- No rhyme or metric scheme
- The qualities of everyday language
- You can easily spot dialogue written in prose because it appears as a block of text, unlike the strict rhythmic patterns of Shakespeare’s verse.

Why Did Shakespeare Use Prose?

Shakespeare used prose to tell us something about his characters by interrupting the rhythmic patterns of the play. Many of Shakespeare’s low-class characters speak in prose to distinguish them from the higher-class, verse-speaking characters. However, this should be treated as a general “rule of thumb”.

For example, one of Hamlet’s most poignant speeches is delivered entirely in prose, even though he is a Prince:

I have of late – but wherefore I know not – lost all my mirth, forgone all custom of exercise; and indeed it goes so heavily with my disposition that this goodly frame, the earth, seems to me a sterile promontory. This most excellent canopy the air, look you, this brave o’erhanging, this majestical roof fretted with golden fire – why, it appears no other thing to me than a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours.

Hamlet, Act 2, Scene 2

In this passage, Shakespeare interrupts Hamlet’s verse with a heartfelt realization about the brevity of human existence. The immediateness of the prose presents Hamlet as genuinely thoughtful – we are in no doubt that, after dropping the verse, Hamlet’s words are solemn.

Shakespeare Uses Prose to Create a Range of Effects

To make dialogue more realistic

Many short, functional lines like “And I, my lord,” and “I pray you leave me” are written in prose to give the play a sense of realism. In some longer speeches, Shakespeare allowed the audience to identify more closely with his characters by using the everyday language of the time.

To create comic effect
Some of Shakespeare’s low-class comic creations aspire to speak in the formal language of their superiors, but do not have the intelligence to achieve this and therefore become objects of ridicule. For example, the uneducated Dogberry in Much Ado About Nothing attempts to use more formal language but keeps getting it wrong. In Act 3, Scene 5, he informs Leonato that “Our watch, sir, have indeed comprehended two auspicious persons.” He means “apprehended” and “suspicious”.

To suggest a character’s mental instability

In King Lear, Lear’s verse deteriorates into prose as the play unfolds to suggest his increasingly erratic mental condition. We can also see a similar technique at work in the above passage from Hamlet.

Why Is Shakespeare’s Use of Prose Important?

In Shakespeare’s day, it was conventional to write in verse, which was seen as a sign of literary excellence. By writing some of his most serious and poignant speeches in prose, Shakespeare was fighting against this convention. It is interesting that some plays like Much Ado About Nothing are written almost entirely in prose – an exceptionally brave move for an Elizabethan playwright.