

**William Shakespeare's**  
*The Comedy of Errors*

**Study Guide**

## ***The Comedy of Errors***

Welcome to *The Comedy of Errors*. We hope that this study guide will help you further your understanding and enjoyment of one of Shakespeare's most popular comedies. The Orlando Shakespeare Theatre has a strong belief in the relationship between the actor and the audience because, without either one, there is no theater. We hope that this study guide will help bring a better understanding of the plot, themes, and characters in this play so that you can more fully enjoy the theatrical experience.

---

### **Contents**

**Page 3: Meet the Characters**

**Page 4: Plot Summary**

**Page 7: Tools for the Text: Paraphrase**

**Page 8-9: Tools for the Text: Imagery**

**Page 9: Background Information**

**Page 10: Questions for Discussion and Shakespeare's Early Style**

**Page 11-16: Complete Learning Plans**

**Page 16-18: Images of *The Comedy of Errors***

---

This guide was written to correspond to the following **Sunshine State Standards**

#### **The Arts**

**Skills and Techniques** - The student understands and applies arts techniques, media and processes.

**Creation and Communication** - The student creates and communicates a range of subject matter, symbols, and ideas using knowledge of structures and functions of the arts.

**Cultural and Historical Connections** - The student understands the arts in relation to history and culture.

**Aesthetic and Critical Analysis** - The student analyzes, evaluates, and responds to characteristics of works of art.

#### **Language Arts**

**Writing** - The student uses the writing process effectively.

**Listening, Viewing, & Speaking** - The student uses listening strategies effectively.

**Language** - The student understands the nature and power of language.

## Meet the Characters

**Solinus:** The Duke of Ephesus at war with Syracuse.

**Antipholus of Ephesus:** the long lost identical twin brother of Antipholus of Syracuse and the son of Egeon; he is a well-respected merchant in Ephesus and husband to Adriana.

**Antipholus of Syracuse:** the long lost identical twin brother to Antipholus of Ephesus and son of Egeon; he has left his home in Syracuse to search for his brother and mother.

**Dromio of Syracuse:** servant to Antipholus of Syracuse and the long lost identical twin brother of Dromio of Ephesus.

**Dromio of Ephesus:** servant to Antipholus of Ephesus and long lost identical twin brother of Dromio of Syracuse.

**Adriana:** the impatient and jealous wife of Antipholus of Ephesus.

**Luciana:** sister of Adriana and the object of Antipholus of Syracuse's affections

**Egeon:** a Syracusan merchant and father of the Antipholus twins; he is in search of his long lost family and is sentenced to death at the beginning of the play.

**Emilia, the Abbess:** long lost mother of the Antipholus twins and wife of Egeon.

**Angelo:** a local goldsmith and friend to Antipholus of Ephesus.

**Balthazar:** a merchant in Ephesus.

**Doctor Pinch:** a schoolmaster and would-be exorcist.

**Luce (a.k.a. Nell):** a kitchen servant who has the hots for Dromio of Ephesus.

**Courtezan:** Friend of Antipholus of Ephesus

## Plot Summary

### Act I

The play opens in the city of Ephesus where Egeon, a merchant from Syracuse, has been apprehended and sentenced to death because of the enmity between the two cities. As Egeon is led to his execution he tells Solinus, the Duke of Ephesus, that he only came to their city to search for his wife and one of his twin sons who were separated from him twenty-five years ago in a shipwreck. The other twin, who grew up with Egeon, is traveling the world as well looking for the other half of their family. The Duke cannot remit his sentence but is moved by Egeon's tale and grants him one day to raise one thousand marks to pay for his ransom.

Meanwhile, unknown to Egeon, his son Antipholus of Syracuse (A.S.) and Dromio of Syracuse (D.S.) have just arrived in Ephesus to continue their search for the other half of their family. A local merchant advises them to tell people that they are from Epidamium to escape the law against Syracusians. A.S. is unaware of his father's fate, nor does he know that his twin brother Antipholus of Ephesus (A.E.) is a prosperous merchant in the city and husband to Adriana. A.S. sends D.S. to pay for their room at an inn. After a few minutes Dromio of Ephesus (D.E.) mistakes A.S. for A.E. and bids him to come home for dinner. A.S. is at first astounded, then angered, and beats D.E. for his foolishness.

### Act II

D.E., nursing his wounds, returns to his mistress Adriana and tells her what took place. In the meantime, A.S. meets up with D.S. and beats him for denying that he ever invited A.S. to go home to his wife and dinner. D.S. is thoroughly confused (and in pain) because he has been at the inn the whole time.

Adriana and her sister Luciana find A.S. and D.S. and, mistaking them for A.E. and D.E., demand that they come home for dinner. A.S. thinks it is unbelievably weird that these two strangers would call him by name, but overlooks this detail because he is more than happy to have dinner with two beautiful women.

### Act III

While A.S. is dining with his brother's wife, with D.S. guarding the door, A.E. arrives at his house with D.E. and his guests Angelo and Balthazar. To his complete amazement Adriana does not let them enter the house (she thinks he is already inside). Furious, A.E. decides to invite his guests to have dinner with him at the house of a Courtesan and to spite his wife, he sends Angelo to get a gold chain, which he had intended to give to Adriana, but out of anger declares he will give it to the Courtesan.

Inside the house of A.E., A.S. is alone with Luciana and he declares his love for her. Luciana is outraged and chides the man she believes to be her brother in law for not treating Adriana well. A.S. insists that he is *not* Adriana's husband, but this only propels Luciana to go fetch her sister.

Finally retreating from Adriana's house, A.S. finds his servant and both agree that life in Ephesus is for the birds, and that they should leave as soon as possible. So A.S. sends D.S. to the port to inquire about any departing ships. While A.S. is waiting, Angelo gives him the gold chain, thinking he is A.E. Angelo then promises to return to A.E.'s home later and collect payment (which he needs to pay off his own debts to another merchant). A.S. is now even more eager to fly the city.

#### **Act IV**

A.E. sends D.E. to buy a rope for him, which he intends to beat his servants at home with for not letting him in. Angelo then runs into A.E. and asks for his payment for the chain. Naturally, A.E. denies him payment saying (truthfully) that he never received a chain from him, and Angelo has him arrested. At that moment, D.S. returns from the port and mistaking A.E. for his master, tells him which ships are ready to sail. Confused with D.S.'s behavior, A.E. sends him to Adriana's house to get money to bail him out of jail.

At Adriana's house, Luciana has told Adriana about how her "husband" declared his love for her and professes her innocence of any illicit behavior. Adriana curses A.E. but admits to still feeling some love towards him. D.S. then arrives and tells Adriana that her husband has been arrested and needs money. Adriana gives him the money and orders D.S. to hurry and save her husband from prison.

As he is returning with the bail money, D.S. runs into A.S. and is surprised to find him at liberty. A.S. has no idea why his servant has a bag of money.

Meanwhile, D.E. finds his own master in custody and A.E. asks him for the ransom money. Baffled, D.E. gives him the rope he was sent to buy, which A.E. uses to beat him with. During the beating, Adriana and Luciana rush in with Doctor Pinch who is brought in to treat A.E.'s madness. A.E. and D.E. are bound and led off by Pinch, leaving Adriana to promise to the officer that she will pay his debts and take care of him. At that moment A.S. and D.S. rush in with swords drawn. Adriana and the officer flee believing it is A.E. and D.E. who, they assume, have escaped from Doctor Pinch.

#### **Act V**

Angelo and another merchant enter the scene discussing how A.E. claimed to have never received the gold chain, and (of course) run into A.S. and D.S.. Angelo sees the gold chain around A.S.'s neck. The men exchange harsh words as Adriana and Luciana come in. A.S. and D.S. use this momentary distraction to hide in a nearby abbey. The Abbess comes out and demands to know what is going on. Adriana describes her husband's madness, but after hearing the story, the Abbess blames Adriana's jealousy as the cause of her husband's behavior. She then denies everyone entry into her house saying that she will cure the man herself.

It is now five o'clock and the bell tolls for Egeon. Duke Solinus appears on the scene leading Egeon to his execution. Adriana sees the Duke and begs him to help them remove her husband from the abbey. The Duke agrees to mediate, but just then A.E. rushes in accompanied by D.E., and he demands that the Duke grant *him* justice against

his wife who allowed him to be arrested him and put him in the hands of Doctor Pinch. There is a barrage of accusations and charges, until finally the Duke summons the Abbess, hoping that she can untie this knot.

Meanwhile, Egeon goes up to A.E. and, mistaking him for the Antipholus he raised in Syracuse, greets him happily. A.E. is perplexed by this seemingly senile and confused old man, and states that he has never seen his father in his life, and that he has always been a citizen in Ephesus.

Then, thankfully, the Abbess enters the scene with A.S. and D.S., which causes general mayhem and confusion. The Abbess greets Egeon and says that she is his wife Emilia and that the identical Antipholi are their twin sons. The rest of the web of confusion is quickly explained: the chain is paid for, the Duke pardons Egeon, and ipso facto, the entire company retires into the abbey for a feast.

**THE END**

## Tools for The Text: Paraphrase

William Shakespeare wrote his plays over 400 years ago. In the past 400 years there have been many changes in the English language that can alter the way we interpret some of Shakespeare's words. Over time, words change from one connotation to another. Sometimes even the definitions of words shift.

A great tool to help connect with Shakespeare's text is Paraphrasing. Paraphrasing is when you take a piece of writing and put it in your own words. It can be very helpful to take Shakespeare's words and put them into modern slang to establish a more personal connection with the writing.

Examine the following monologue where Antipholus of Ephesus is pleading to the Duke for help.

*Antipholus:*

**By th' way we met  
My wife, her sister, and a rabble more  
Of vile confederates. Along with them  
They brought one Pinch, a hungry lean-faced villain,  
A mere anatomy, a mountebank,  
A threadbare juggler and a fortune teller,  
A needy, hollow-eyed, sharp looking wretch,  
A living dead man. This pernicious slave,  
Forsooth, took on him as a conjurer,  
And gazing in mine eyes, feeling my pulse,  
And with no face, as 'twere, outfacing me,  
Cries out, I was possessed.**

One possible paraphrase might read:

*On the way to my house we ran into my wife, her sister, and a bunch of other imbeciles. Among the imbeciles was a guy named Pinch, a jaundice looking man, a walking skeleton, a nut job. A quack! A gypsy! A zombie looking man! This obnoxious little man acted like he was a wizard, and looking me dead in the eye and feeling my pulse, this man, who looked worse than I did, tells everyone that I'm possessed!*

## Tools for The Text: Imagery

Another tool to help with the words of Shakespeare is to use what comes into your mind as fuel for a scene of a character. Just as pictures come into your mind when you read a book, Shakespeare used even more profound words and phrases that create very powerful images.

Let's take another look at that Antipholus monologue again.

By th' way we met  
My wife, her sister, and a **rabble** more  
Of **vile confederates**. Along with them  
They brought one Pinch, a **hungry lean-faced villain**,  
A mere **anatomy**, a mountebank,  
A threadbare juggler and a fortune teller,  
A needy, **hollow-eyed, sharp looking wretch**,  
A **living dead man**. This pernicious slave,  
Forsooth, took on him as a **conjurer**,  
And gazing in mine eyes, feeling my pulse,  
And with no face, as 'twere, outfacing me,  
Cries out, I was **possessed**.

Take a look at the words in bold. The first step is to write down the first few images that come into your mind:

**rabble:**

**vile confederates:**

**hungry lean-faced villain:**

**anatomy:**

**hollow-eyed:**

**sharp looking wretch:**

**living dead man:**

**conjurer:**

**possessed:**

The next step is to ask yourself what those images might mean to you. What emotions do they produce? What actions do they make you want to do? You may find that certain



words contain more powerful images than others.

Now that you are personally connected to the words, say the monologue out loud and allow the images to fill your mind, and your audience's mind, as you speak.

## Background Information

*The Comedy of Errors* is one Shakespeare's earliest plays, the first known performance is recorded to have been at Gray's Inn on December 28, 1594, and was printed in the First Folio in 1623. However, thematic resemblances to other plays have lead scholars to believe that *The Comedy of Errors* might have been written some years earlier.

The play was most likely taken from a play called *Menaechmi*, a play by the Roman playwright Plautus. Although the English translation of Plautus' *Menaechmi* did not appear until 1595, Shakespeare had almost certainly read the play in Latin, the similarities are too striking to assume otherwise. The premise of *Menaechmi* follows: a Syracusan merchant has twin sons, one of which he takes on a trip abroad. During the trip, his son is separated and is taken by a childless trader and taken to Epidamnum. The father is heart broken and dies a few days later. When the news of the father and son reaches Syracuse, the other brother's name is changed to that of his missing brother.

The main action of the play is set some years later when Menaechmus of Syracuse arrives at Epidamnum. He is greeted warmly by everyone and receives free gifts and banquets by the citizens. Epidamnum is a place of hearts desire for the Syracusan Menaechmus. However, the native Menaechmus has the exact opposite experience during the play, his familiar world of business and domestic cares seems to have been turned upside down. Before things get to out of control, the two men finally meet and decide to return to Syracuse.

Unlike Plautus, whose main focus of his play was the uncomfortable experience of the native twin, Shakespeare chose to concentrate on the problems of the Syracusan Antipholus. Shakespeare also changed the name of the town from Epidamnum to Ephesus. Ephesus, as many scholars have pointed out, had biblical references in Acts 19:13-29 with witchcraft and sorcery and in Ephesians 5:22-33 with St. Paul's discussion of marriage. Witchcraft and marriage are both important themes in *The Comedy of Errors*. To even further the complexity of the plot, Shakespeare also added the second set of twins, the Dromio's (taken from another play by Plautus, *Amphitruo*) to his play, allowing for more possibilities of mistaken identity.

However, Shakespeare's most important addition to the play may have been the father of the Antipholi, Egeon. First of all, the two appearances by Egeon, one at the beginning of the play and one at the end, allow Shakespeare to clearly show the time span of the play from sunrise to sunset. Secondly, Egeon allowed Shakespeare to open the play with a sense of doom looming in the background, Egeon will be killed at sundown if no one can pay his ransom. As Anne Barton wrote in The Riverside Shakespeare, "Shakespeare seems to be wedded to the idea that happy endings must, to carry conviction, be won from a serious confrontation with morality, violence, and time." (113)

## Questions for Discussion

### 1.) Tragedy in Comedy

This play is one of Shakespeare's most performed comedies, yet there are many dramatic and tragic elements in the play. Analyze how the threat of tragedy (Egeon's execution, Antipholus of Ephesus' arrest) impact and propel the humor of the play.

### 2.) Importance of Status

The Antipholi and the Dromio's are the four main characters of the play. Discuss the similarities and differences of the master-servant relationship between Antipholus and Dromio of Syracuse and Antipholus and Dromio of Ephesus. How do these relationships help with the comedy of the play? Do the Dromio's ever have, or seem to have, higher status than their masters? Do shifts in status help the comedy too? Why or why not?

### 3.) Marriage

Discuss the perspectives on marriage offered by characters in the play.

## Shakespeare's Early Style

Shakespeare wrote his plays partly in verse and partly in prose, freely alternating between the two in the same acts and scenes. Verse is a collection of lines that follow a regular, rhythmic pattern, and for Shakespeare the verse style was iambic pentameter (each verse line has ten syllables with five stressed syllables and five unstressed syllables, hence **pentameter**). Iambic pentameter was the popular verse style during Shakespeare's time, mainly because it is easy to write in with the English language. In its highest form, verse has a lyrical and poetic quality. Prose on the other hand is simply our everyday conversational language.

Shakespeare altered his writing style significantly between his first play (1590-92) and his last (1613). Shakespeare's early style was somewhat rigid with strict adherence to the established verse form of playwriting. *The Comedy of Errors* (1592-94) is very dense with verse and almost entirely written in iambic pentameter.

The style of Shakespeare's middle and late plays strays from the path of strict iambic pentameter. These plays became more creative and free of strict adherence to the rules, constantly switching between prose and verse, because Shakespeare learned to listen to his inner voice and trust himself more as a writer. It is from these later plays that we get the immortal characters of Hamlet, Macbeth, King Lear, and Iago.

## Complete Learning Plans

This LEARNING PLAN is designed for Grades 5- 7

**Objectives:** This exercise is intended to keep students involved in the action of the play and the characters. It will add an extra level of excitement to watching the play. In addition to following the story, they are now challenged to locate individual lines, identify what is going on in the scene that causes those lines to be said, and to find greater connection with the text and the story as it comes to life.

**Standards and Benchmarks:** LA.C.1.3, LA.C.2.3, LA.E.2.3, TH.D.1.3

**Materials Needed:** A copy of the play, a notebook/piece of paper, drawing and coloring materials, and a pencil.

---

### **Suggested Lesson Plan:**

- 1) Ask the students to carefully watch the play, paying close attention to all of the action that takes place.
- 2) Assign the students to pick one scene that particularly engaged them during the performance. Have them write down, as best they can, all of the action that took place in their scene, which characters were involved and where the scene fit within the play. They should also write down what, in particular, drew them to pick each scene.
- 3) Next, have them look for that scene in the play. Have each student draw a picture depicting their scene or write a short story inspired by the scene. They must also choose their favorite line from the scene and include it somewhere in their picture or short story.
- 4) Back in the classroom have each student present their picture or short story to the class. They must tell the class what action has occurred in the scene and where it fits within the play. They must also read the line they have chosen aloud and tell the class their interpretation of the line.

### **Assessment:**

Your students will find a greater connection with the action, the text and the characters. They will be encouraged to stay engaged in the story to pick out which part of the action they liked best. This will also help them to begin to look at story structure and how each piece of a story fits within the whole.

## Complete Learning Plans

This LEARNING PLAN is designed for grades 7 - 12.

**Objectives:** This exercise, similar to the last, is intended to challenge higher level students. In addition to locating specific pieces of action, it will challenge them to connect with the characters on a personal level. This should help them to find meaning for themselves within the monologues. It should inspire them to view the play as a living thing they can connect to personally and introduce them to the fun of exploring the text.

**Standards and Benchmarks:** LA.B.2.4, LA.C.1.4, LA.C.2.4, LA.C.3.4, LA.E.2.4, TH.A.1.4, TH.D.1.4

**Materials Needed:** A copy of the play, a notebook/piece of paper, and a pencil.

---

### Suggested Lesson Plan:

- 1) After attending the Festival's production of *The Comedy of Errors*, the students should be assigned to pick a scene and write down the action, who was involved, where it fit within the play and what drew them to choose that scene.
- 2) Next the students should find their chosen scene within the script. Have them examine the text and figure out how the text helps to convey the action that they enjoyed so much.
- 3) Have your student paraphrase the scene as explained in "Tools for the Text" (i.e. Have them put the scene in their own words- the more slang used the better).
- 4) Students should then bring in their scene, complete with paraphrase on a separate sheet. Have students remind their fellow students of the point in the play from which their piece is taken. Have them perform the paraphrased scene first, followed by performing the scene using Shakespeare's text.

### Assessment:

Students should be able to identify the characters and scenes from the play. They should be able to identify the situations from which their line is taken and paraphrase the entire scene. Students should be able to use the paraphrase to connect with the text they are speaking and perform their own interpretation of the scene. If they have connected with the work, their meaning and intentions should be clear in the performance.

## Complete Learning Plans

This LEARNING PLAN is designed for Grades 7-12

**Objective:** In this lesson students will interpret *The Comedy of Errors* by creating a silent movie, requiring them to think creatively and enhance their storytelling skills in verbal, nonverbal, and written form. This lesson will take approximately three class periods.

**Standards and Benchmarks:** LA.A.2.4, LA.A.E.2.4, TH.A.1.3, TH.A.2.3, TH.A.1.4

**Materials Needed:** Copies of *The Comedy of Errors*. Optional- video camera or still camera and scanner, computer lab access, technician or support teacher if necessary.

---

### Suggested Lesson Plan:

- 1.) Divide the class into five groups and assign each group one act of the play.
- 2.) Tell students it is their task to create a silent movie of different tableaux to represent the most important developments in their act of the play. The movie must have 5-10 "slides," frozen images that represent individual moments in the text. Each group member must participate.
- 3.) Emphasize the importance of heightened nonverbal communication. Discuss facial expressions, gestures, stance, interaction, and pose.
- 4.) Have students begin by brainstorming ideas for the most important moments in the text, then choose a selective group of those moments for their movie.
- 5.) Next, students should explore ways to represent each moment. Encourage them to experiment with different ideas before settling on one.
- 6.) Allow students time to rehearse their tableaux.
- 7.) Showtime: if your school has a video camera, record the performances. If you have access to a scanner, you could photograph the slides and scan them as well.
- 8.) Using PowerPoint or other presentation software, have students add narration to the slides they have created. Finally, have students complete their movies with slides that introduce their work and its cast. If you don't have access to PowerPoint, have one of the students in each group be the Narrator for their movie, or find other creative ways to

further the presentation of the movies.

9.) Present the completed movie to the class and print a hard copy for public display. Conclude by discussing the differences in the choices made by the different groups, and the lessons students learned in the creative process.

**Assessment:**

Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes. Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and nonprint texts. Students use a variety of technological and information resources (e.g., databases, computer networks, video) to gather and synthesize information and to create and communicate knowledge.

## Complete Learning Plans

This LEARNING PLAN is designed for Grades 6-10

**Objective:** To encourage students to think critically about the effect visual art has on their perception of literature and theatre.

**Standards and Benchmarks:** LA.A.2.4, LA.D.2.4, T.H.E.1.4, VA.B.1.3, VA.D.1.4

**Materials Needed:** Several different editions of the play *The Comedy of Errors* and the images provided in this study guide.

---

### Suggested Lesson Plan:

- 1.) Before you see or read the play, tell your students that they are going to see/read a play called *The Comedy of Errors*. Based upon the title alone have the students brainstorm a list of the types of characters, situations, emotions, themes, locations, and images they think might be included in the play. Then remind them that this play was written 400 years ago and see if it changes their initial thoughts. Why did Shakespeare choose this title? Did he feel the title would help sell tickets to the play? Write the list on newsprint. Post it before seeing *The Comedy of Errors*.
- 2.) Bring in different copies of the script of *The Comedy of Errors* (numerous editions are available at the OCPL downtown branch or download from amazon.com). Share and discover the artwork on the various editions. What function do those images have? Note too the colors on the cover. What do the colors mean and why were they chosen? Do these images help sell this edition? What words did the publishers choose to put on the cover? In what font is the title of the play? What other words or phrases are on the cover? Do these words and phrases help sell this edition? Are you more likely to buy a book or magazine based on images or words? Are there images and words on the back cover?
- 3.) Distribute the images provided in this study guide to the class. Ask the class what assumptions about the play they have after looking at these images. What can they tell about the play after looking at the snap shot of the two Dromio's? What are some of the main images in that picture? How does that picture compare to the picture of the painting depicting the end of the play? Do both pictures evoke similar assumptions about the play? What are the key images in the painting? Also, look at the posters that were used to advertise different productions of *The Comedy of Errors*. Ask the class to discuss the main images in the different posters. What does each poster say about the production it is advertising?
- 4.) Post Performance follow up. Ask the students to create a poster or book cover for *The Comedy of Errors*. They can cut images out of magazines and newspapers or draw them. What words will they include and why?

**Assessment:**

Your students will begin to make inferences about the themes of the play before reading the text or seeing the production. They will become excited about reading the play to be able to confirm they're hypotheses, encouraging them to stay focused on the action of the play and the characters.



Merchant, Angelo, Lady Abbess, Adriana, Courtezan, Duke, Ægeon, Antipholus and Dromio of Syracuse, Antipholus and Dromio of Ephesus, Headsman, &C.

*Painted by John Francis Riguard*



Duke, Courtezan, Lady Abbess, Egeon, Adriana, Luciana, Angelo, Antipholus and Dromio of Syracuse, and Antipholus and Dromio of Ephesus





THE COMEDY OF  
ERRORS

*Edited by*  
*Frances E. Dolan*



THE PELICAN  
SHAKESPEARE

Copyrighted material

Production posters of *The Comedy of Errors* from various Theatre Companies



