



TEACHER GUIDE

GRADES 9-12

COMPREHENSIVE CURRICULUM BASED LESSON PLANS

Rosencrantz & Guildenstern are Dead

Tom Stoppard

READ, WRITE, THINK, DISCUSS AND CONNECT

Rosencrantz & Guildenstern are Dead

Tom Stoppard

TEACHER GUIDE

NOTE:

The trade book edition of the novel used to prepare this guide is found in the Novel Units catalog and on the Novel Units website. Using other editions may have varied page references.

Please note: We have assigned Interest Levels based on our knowledge of the themes and ideas of the books included in the Novel Units sets, however, please assess the appropriateness of this novel or trade book for the age level and maturity of your students prior to reading with them. You know your students best!

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Skills and Strategies

Critical Thinking

Analysis, conflict, brainstorming

Vocabulary

Target words, definitions,
application

Writing

Poetry, essay, essay questions,
sonnet, script

Literary Elements

Characterization, theme, setting,
plot development, tone, mood,
simile, metaphor, pun, parody,
symbolism, allusion, irony, genre

Comprehension

Cause/effect, prediction, decision
making, inference, conflict
resolution

Listening/Speaking

Discussion, script performance

Across the Curriculum

Art—collage, caricature, poster,
design; Drama—script; Music—
appropriate background music;
Multimedia—video

Genre: drama—Theater of the Absurd

Setting: nondescript terrain on a drab stage; Elsinore Castle in Denmark, boat

Themes: fate, futility of life, existentialism, real vs. unreal, absurdity, death

Mood: confused, eccentric

Tone: darkly humorous, pessimistic

Protagonists: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern (Ros and Guil)

Antagonists: Claudius, Hamlet

Conflict: person vs. person, person vs. fate, person vs. self

Summary

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, minor characters in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, assume the roles of protagonists as they reveal the story of what happens to them as the plot for *Hamlet* develops. They vaguely recall being summoned to the castle in Denmark and know their orders have something to do with their childhood friend, Hamlet. However, they are unsure of why they are going and what they are supposed to do when they get there. At times, they are confused about their own identities. During their rambling, sometimes quarrelsome, dialogue, they debate the meaning of life and death and often mix reality and illusion. Their contact with a troupe of tragedians leads to the retelling of the murder of Hamlet's father and his quest for revenge. Segments from the plot of *Hamlet* intermingle with the story of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, including their summons to Elsinore Castle, their assignment to determine the source of Hamlet's despondency, and their eventual orders to escort him to England. Although the two protagonists accidentally discover the letter ordering their deaths, they are powerless to prevent their inevitable fate.

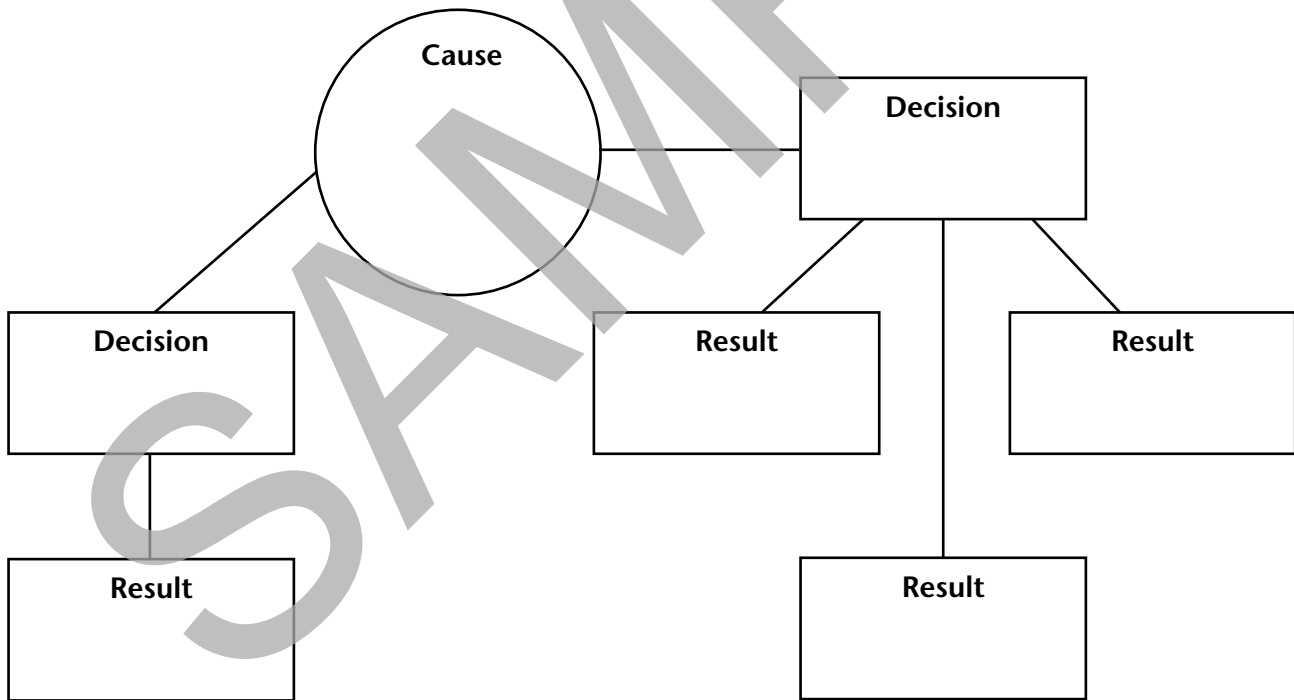
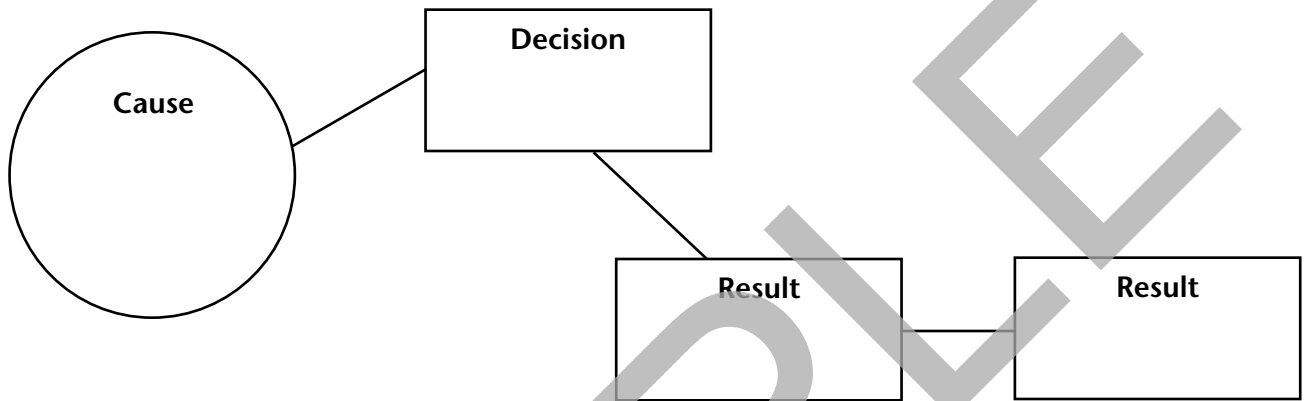
About the Playwright

Personal: Tom Stoppard was born Tomas Straussler in Zlín, Czechoslovakia, July 3, 1937. His family moved to Singapore in 1939 to escape the Nazis. He, his older brother, and his mother were evacuated to India in 1942 to avoid the dangers of World War II. His father, a physician, remained in Singapore and was killed during the Japanese invasion. His mother married a British army officer, Kenneth Stoppard, and the family moved to England in 1946. Tom has been married twice and has two sons from each marriage. He was knighted by Queen Elizabeth in 1997.

Career: Tom Stoppard worked as a reporter until the early 1960s and in late 1962 and early 1963, wrote drama reviews and interviews under his own name and under the pseudonym William Boot. In 1960, he completed his first full-length play, *A Walk on the Water* (produced on stage in 1968 as *Enter a Free Man*), which he refers to as a composite of several plays he admired. He subsequently wrote works for radio, television, and theater. In 1964, he wrote a one-act play that later became *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead*, which was first performed in August 1966. The play received widespread acclaim after it was performed by the National Theatre Company in London in 1967, and Stoppard became known as a leading modern playwright. London Theater critics gave the play top honors, and in its printed form, the play was chosen as one of the "Notable Books of 1967" by the American Library Association. Stoppard's other major plays include *Jumpers* (1972), *Travesties* (1974), *Dirty Linen* and *New-Found-Land* (1976), *Night and Day* (1978), *The Real Thing* (1982), *Hapgood* (1988), *Arcadia* (1993), and *Indian Ink* (1995). His play, *Every Good Boy Deserves Favour* (1977), reflects his concerns with human rights issues, especially the situation of political dissidents in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. He has written original screenplays and adaptations for stage and screen, including *Shakespeare in Love* (1998). He also wrote a novel, *Lord Malquist and Mr. Moon*, published in 1965.

Cause/Effect Chart

Directions: Make a flow chart to show decisions a character made, the decisions s/he could have made, and the result(s) of each. (Use your imagination to speculate on the results of decisions the character could have made.)



Note: Scenes from *Hamlet* are taken from the Penguin Books paperback edition, © 1980, ISBN 0-14-070734-4. References may differ in other editions of the play. In this guide, these references are written as numbers. For example, Act 2, Scene 2, lines 1–30 is written as 2.2.1–30.

Suggested Teaching Strategy: Plays are written to be acted onstage, not read silently. Students will gain a deeper appreciation for *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern Are Dead* if it is read aloud. By assigning sections a day in advance, students have a chance to go over their lines and will feel more comfortable reading the play aloud in class.

Act One, pp. 11–21

Rosencrantz, hereafter “Ros,” and Guildenstern, hereafter “Guil,” engage in a coin-tossing game of chance and comical dialogue. They vaguely remember receiving a royal summons but can’t remember where they are going or why. An acting troupe arrives.

Vocabulary
jocularly (14)
essence (16)
sylogism (16)
postulate (17)
equanimity (18)
expiating (20)

Discussion Questions

1. Analyze the symbolism of the initial setting. *(It is a place without any visible character, symbolizing the featureless world in which Rosencrantz and Guildenstern find themselves. The insignificance of their external surroundings reflects their confused mental state as they attempt to deal with a world they cannot understand. Their characteristics are as featureless as the terrain. The initial setting alludes to the existential belief that human beings are moving through a world of nothingness. p. 11)*
2. Analyze the attributes of the protagonists and their interaction with each other. *(Very little is revealed about their individual attributes. The “character note” for Ros refers to his feeling a little embarrassed at taking so much money from his friend. Guil’s “character note” refers to his being aware of the problem of losing money and its implications but his refusal to panic about it. They are unsure of who they are, often mistake each other’s identities, and are frequently viewed as one person. Guil, who seems to be more intelligent, attempts to understand and explain things but becomes confused and applies inappropriate reasoning when answering simple questions. They try but are unable to complete well-known clichés. Both vaguely remember a royal summons but neither can remember specifics. They intermingle past and present with no clear-cut understanding of either and have difficulty differentiating between reality and unreality, e.g., whether or not they actually hear drums. Guil’s emotions are more affected than Ros’, whose primary goal is to go home. Guil’s statement that he would bet on something but Ros wouldn’t [p. 13] infers that Guil is more daring than Ros. Their disconnected interaction is typical of the Theater of the Absurd. pp. 11–21)*
3. Discuss the game Ros and Guil are playing and what this implies. Note the reference to the “law of probability” (p. 12). *(Ros wins their repeated coin tosses, which have resulted in “heads” 85 times, a new record, implying that they often play this game for lack of something more constructive to do. Guil questions the probability of a coin landing the same so many times, but Ros, who is more trusting, accepts things just as they are although he does admit he would be suspicious if Guil had won 85 times. Guil attempts to explain the law of probability or averages by attempting to quote the concept, “If six monkeys were placed in a room with six typewriters, eventually they would write the works of Shakespeare.” He gets it wrong and creates a parody by mixing up the idea of monkeys with the law of averages concerning the number of times a coin thrown into the air would land “tails.” pp. 11–16)*

4. Analyze the metaphor, “Fear! The crack that might flood your brain with light” (p. 15). (*Guil becomes furious when Ros shows no fear that a game of chance might result in personal loss. He implies that, if Ros experiences fear, it might cause him to start using his brain for other things. Ros remains oblivious to Guil’s implication.*)
5. Analyze Guil’s theories as to his repeated losses. Note the biblical allusions to the children of Israel and Lot’s wife. (*Guil continues to lose and attempts to explain his misfortune as the redistribution of wealth, i.e., his to Ros, atonement for past sins, or divine intervention. Guil believes Ros may have attained God’s favor as did the children of Israel as He guided them out of slavery in Egypt to the Promised Land [as told in the book of Exodus]. On the other hand, Guil may be experiencing God’s retribution similar to the way God turned Lot’s wife into a pillar of salt for looking back at Sodom and Gomorrah [Genesis 19:22–26]. p. 16*)
6. Discuss the meaning of the word syllogism. Note the application of this definition to Guil’s syllogisms (pp. 16, 17). Examine how a syllogism triggers thoughts of the royal summons. (*A syllogism is a formula for presenting an argument logically and includes three divisions: a major premise, a minor premise, and a conclusion. Guil proposes a syllogism that includes the word “home.” Their ensuing conversation triggers Guil’s memory about something that happened at “home,” i.e., a messenger brought a royal summons. pp. 16–17*)
7. Analyze Guil’s monologue on the “scientific approach to the examination of phenomena” (p. 17). (*He becomes dismayed by Ros’ apathy and tries to explain his conclusion that, since their coin game does not reflect probability, they are operating in supernatural forces where the law of probability does not affect them. As his rambling monologue continues, he realizes that this supposition is incorrect because they have been playing the same game, first with one and then the other winning. The ensuing nonsensical dialogue finally causes Ros to remember the urgency of the summons, and they realize this is the reason they are traveling. They still don’t know where they’re going. pp. 17–21*)
8. Examine the significance of Guil’s tale about the unicorn. (*He attempts to explain Ros’ illusion of hearing a band by telling the story of the unicorn. He does not think it is possible that a band is in this insignificant place, just as a man who thought he saw a unicorn would know this was not true. The crowd becomes involved and concludes that the “unicorn” is actually a horse with an arrow in its forehead. This tale sets the stage for the arrival of the troupe of actors, including musicians. p. 21*)

Supplementary Activities

1. Look up the meaning of the “law of diminishing returns” and write a brief explanation of Guil’s misuse of the term on p. 13.
2. Ask volunteers to read aloud *Hamlet* 2.2.1–32. Working in small groups, have students develop an acrostic for “friendship” based on the description of the friendship Hamlet has with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.