

Using  
*Bloom's Taxonomy to  
Explore Literature*

# Levels of Understanding



## *Macbeth* By William Shakespeare

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## Introduction to Levels of Understanding

FOR MANY STUDENTS, studying literature is like being lost in an alien universe, filled with hidden symbols, structures, and meanings that only a scholar can uncover. Without a teacher's direction, students lack the skills and confidence to evaluate a work of literature on their own, and instead, will frequently turn to resources such as the Internet for guidance. As a result, they assume another writer's views instead of developing their own.

*Levels of Understanding* is founded upon an interpretation of psychologist Benjamin Bloom's groundbreaking classification of educational objectives. Each of our units breaks down complex questions students will encounter into smaller parts, showing the steps a critical reader should take in order to develop a sound evaluation of a text. Each section of the guide contains five types of questions representative of Bloom's learning domains—starting with the most basic and foundational skill, knowledge and comprehension, and gradually building to the highest skill, evaluation. All the way, reluctant students are provided with the scaffolding they need to advance from one level of understanding to the next.

The five types of questions representative of Bloom's domains, are as follows:

- **Comprehension**—will ask the most basic questions to ascertain the students' fundamental understanding of the text: plot facts, character identification, etc.
- **Reader Response (Application)**—will ask the students to apply what they discover in the text to personal experience, often by presenting an opinion of a character or event.
- **Analysis**—will require students to study how various techniques and literary or theatrical devices (diction, symbolism, imagery, metaphors, asides, soliloquies etc.) function in the text. Analysis questions do not ask the student to merely *identify* or *define* a literary, theatrical, or rhetorical device, but also explain its significance.
- **Synthesis**—will bridge the gap between the analysis and evaluation questions, requiring students to look at other chapter or scenes in the text and draw conclusions about themes, motifs, or a writer's style. Often, a synthesis question will require the student to draw on prior knowledge—what has been learned in class or through research—and/or information from sources other than the literary title in order to arrive at a satisfactory answer.
- **Evaluation**—will ask the student to make a qualitative judgment of the text and determine whether a particular aspect of it is effective or ineffective.

Other books may explain Bloom's taxonomy, define the terms, and offer a general example or two. *Levels of Understanding*, however, provides the teacher with title-specific questions to allow him or her to effectively bring Bloom into the classroom.

In addition, unlike other available products that claim to address Bloom's "higher order thinking skills," *Levels of Understanding* does not teach students how to answer questions about a particular text, but instead, helps them develop skills to evaluate literature critically and without guidance. These are skills that will not only help students prepare for standardized tests like the Advanced Placement Language and Literature exams, the SATs, and the ACTs, but will also give students the self-assurance to develop and articulate personal views—a skill that will be highly advantageous to them in college.

This product, however, is not geared toward upper-level students only, but is a versatile guide that can be used for students of all ability levels—remedial through honors. The teacher may customize the product to fit the class's objectives and goals, determining which questions the students will answer. Additionally, the guide is entirely reproducible, and each major division begins on a new page, so you may use *Levels of Understanding* for the whole work of literature or only a specific section. ♡



## How to Use this Unit

Each *Levels of Understanding: Using Bloom's Taxonomy to Explore Literature* unit is intended to be a deep and rich component of your literature program, whether your goal is to prepare your students for a large-scale assessment like the AP Literature exam or to challenge your students to read carefully and to think deeply about what they have read.

The questions in this guide are designed to be flexible and meet *your* needs. They can be used as

- homework questions when students read the text independently.
- in-class reading check questions and “bell-ringer” journal entries.
- class discussion questions and prompts.
- focus questions for pre-writing and essay planning.
- review and study questions for assessment.

While the **Teacher's Guide** contains an answer key, you will find that the higher-order questions (especially *synthesis* and *evaluation*) have model answers that represent more than one possible response. It would be inappropriate to penalize a student whose well-reasoned and supportable answer did not match the “correct” answer in the guide.

For this reason, we strongly recommend that you view the questions in this guide as learning activities and *not as assessment activities*.

Many of your students are likely to find the higher domains new and perhaps intimidating. Others might be alarmed at having to support their reader-response reactions and their evaluations with an accurate comprehension of the text. The questions in this guide should act as both scaffolding and safety net, guiding your students through a new reading and thinking process and allowing them to practice without fear of “failure.”

The writing prompts, however, provide rich assessment and evaluation opportunities. Every prompt is designed to invite your students to operate in one or more of the higher order domains, thus giving students the opportunity to demonstrate their ability, and giving you the opportunity to evaluate their progress.

Whether you use *Levels of Understanding: Using Bloom's Taxonomy to Explore Literature* as the core of your literature curriculum or as a supplement, the guide and writing prompts are designed to help your students attain a deep understanding of the works they read. Ideally, they will gain the type of understanding demanded by Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, and most state standards, including the Common Core State Standards of the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association. 🍷



## Introduction to *Macbeth*

WHEN BEGINNING TO TEACH a Shakespearean tragedy such as *Macbeth*, students may be daunted by the unfamiliar language and allusions in the play, but once they become more familiar with some of these features, they will not only understand the text, but they will also be able to evaluate it critically as well.

It is important to note that this play, being read in the classroom, has been taken out of its original context in two ways:

a) *Macbeth*, like all plays, was written to be performed, not read. Students lose the visual and auditory cues that would be available to an audience: they cannot hear the pitch and intonation of Lady Macbeth's lines as she washes imaginary blood off her hands; they cannot see the haggard and unearthly appearance of the Weird Sisters as they conjure spirits; they cannot share Macbeth's sense of disbelief

as the actor portraying Banquo's ghost vanishes from the stage. Instead, they must visualize these scenes for themselves, relying only upon the text.

b) Shakespeare's company performed this play in the early 17th century, and his audience would have easily understood the allusions and colloquialisms. Many readers today, however, lack the classical education that much of Shakespeare's audience would have had, in addition to a knowledge of England's Nordic past, the ancient Scottish monarchs, the political and social milieu of the Renaissance, the structure and nuances of Shakespeare's language, and the other works of literature that were contemporaneous with Shakespeare's. For this reason, a student in the 21st century will need to consult additional sources in order to obtain a full understanding and appreciation of Shakespeare's play. 🍷

## The Historical Macbeth: Fact and Fiction

### *Mac Bethad mac Findlaich*

THE TITLE CHARACTER of the play was not a person of Shakespeare's creation, but an actual 11th century Scottish king by the name of Mac Bethad mac Findlaich.

The historical Macbeth was born around 1005 and reigned from 1040 to 1057. He was the son of Findlaich, the Mormaer, or Steward, of Moray; his mother is believed to have been Doada, the second daughter of Malcolm II (Máel Coluim mac Cináeda). Malcolm II, the high king before Duncan, had only daughters, and Gaelic custom did not pass succession through the female line, nor did it pass from father to son. The king's successor needed only to be a male member of the royal family and the most apt to rule efficiently. Duncan I and Macbeth, both grandsons of Malcolm II and his closest male heirs, had equal claim to the throne. Whether Duncan was officially named successor by Malcolm II or simply recognized as the heir-apparent, he ascended to the throne after Malcolm's death.

The Lady Macbeth of history is, perhaps, even more interesting. Gruoch ingen Boite was the daughter of a Scottish prince and the granddaughter of a Scottish high king. Her grandfather was either King Kenneth II (Cináed mac Maíl Choluim) or—most likely—Kenneth III (Cináed mac Duib). The historical Macbeth was actually her second husband; her first husband (Gille Coemgáin mac Maíl Brigti, Mormaer of Moray) and fifty of his men were killed when they were trapped in a wooden house and burned to death. Sources are unclear whether this murder was committed by then-king Malcolm II (both Duncan and Macbeth's grandfather) or by Macbeth himself. It is known, however, that

Macbeth married the widow Gruoch (who became Shakespeare's Lady Macbeth) and adopted her fatherless son, Lulach mac Gille Coemgáin. Macbeth and Gruoch apparently had no children of their own.

Unlike the events in Shakespeare's play, Duncan was not murdered in his sleep while a guest at Macbeth's castle. Instead, Duncan was killed by Macbeth and his army in a battle near Elgin, Morayshire, in 1040. After Duncan's death, Malcolm (Máel Coluim mac Donnchada) and Donalbain (Domnall Bán mac Donnchada), who were young children, fled. Macbeth became the high king without opposition.

Macbeth ruled peacefully and unopposed until 1054, when Siward, the Earl of Northumbria, challenged Macbeth and attempted to replace him with Malcolm, Duncan's then-grown son. Even though Macbeth lost the battle, he was not yet overthrown.

Finally, in 1057, Malcolm killed Macbeth in the Battle of Lumphanan in Aberdeenshire. Unlike the events in Shakespeare's play, however, Malcolm did not replace Macbeth as king. Lulach, Macbeth's stepson, succeeded him and ruled for approximately five months. He, too, was killed in battle, and Malcolm finally became king.

Several suggested but undeveloped issues underlie Shakespeare's account that probably have their roots in the historical record of Scotland:

- Macbeth's apparent desire to be king
- Lady Macbeth's hatred of Duncan and her strong desire to see her husband on the throne
- Lady Macbeth's children
- Macbeth's lack of a son and heir 🍷

**Levels of Understanding:**

Using Bloom's Taxonomy of Learning Domains  
to explore William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*

# Writing Prompts

**Act I: Analysis, Synthesis, Evaluation:**

Explain the extent to which the first act succeeds (or fails) to establish Macbeth as a tragic hero. Be certain to support all of your assertions with direct references to the play as well as citations to other reliable literary criticism.

*Do not merely summarize the plot.*

**[Note to Teacher:** Depending on your goals and intents for the class, this prompt could motivate a “mini-research” project in which students themselves seek information on the tragic hero, or the “other reliable criticism” can simply be that which appears in the instructional materials you are using. The point is simply for the student to synthesize information from more than one source in order to support his or her thesis.]

**Act II: Comprehension, Analysis:**

Explain Shakespeare's intent in combining in a single, relatively short act, one of the most tense and dramatic scenes in the play, a ribald scene of comic relief, and a narrative bridge during which the events that transpired over several weeks are summarized.

**Act III: Analysis, Synthesis:**

Duncan's death in the previous Act, referred to as a “breach in nature,” has led to a series of unnatural events in Scotland. Trace how nature's responses to the regicide develop through the progress of this act, and in a well-organized essay, explain what the natural phenomena implies about the nature of kingship and legitimate rule.

**Act IV: Comprehension, Analysis, Synthesis:**

Act IV is the shortest act in the play, but it may be the most significant, serving as the *peripeteia*, or turning point, in the tragedy. Explain how Act IV solidifies Macbeth's role as a tragic hero and commits him to a tragic fate.

**Act V: Analysis, Synthesis:**

In Act V, scene v, Macbeth gives one of the most famous Shakespearean speeches:

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow  
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day  
To the last syllable of recorded time;  
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!  
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage  
And then is heard no more. It is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing.

In a well-organized essay, analyze the irony of Macbeth's expressing this sentiment. Consider the character and story arcs that have led Macbeth to this point.

*Do not merely summarize the plot.*

**Entire Play: Analysis, Synthesis:**

In 1949, playwright Arthur Miller wrote a groundbreaking essay entitled, “Tragedy and the Common Man,” in which he argued this thesis:

As a general rule...the tragic feeling is evoked in us when we are in the presence of a character who is ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing—his sense of personal dignity. From Orestes to Hamlet, Medea to Macbeth, the underlying struggle is that of the individual attempting to gain his ‘rightful’ position in his society.

Using *Macbeth* as your example, support, refute, or qualify Miller's thesis. Be certain to support all of your assertions with direct references to the play as well as citations to other reliable literary criticism.

**[Note to Teacher:** Depending on your goals and intents for the class, this prompt could motivate a “mini-research” project in which students themselves seek information on tragedy and the tragic hero, or the “other reliable criticism” can simply be that which appears in the instructional materials you are using. The point is simply for the student to synthesize information from more than one source in order to argue his or her point.]





**Levels of Understanding:**  
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# *Macbeth*

ACT I

## Comprehension

1. What is the political situation in Scotland at the beginning of the play?

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2. What two great feats has Macbeth accomplished?

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3. Who were Macbeth's chief opponents, and what has happened to each?

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4. How do the witches greet Macbeth? What prophecy do they make to Banquo?

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5. What significant announcement does Duncan make regarding his son, Malcolm?

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6. What does Lady Macbeth ask of the "spirits / That tend on mortal thoughts"? What is her intent?

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# Macbeth

## ACT II

### Comprehension

1. What does Banquo tell Macbeth he dreamt about in II, i?

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2. What does Macbeth ask of Banquo? How does Banquo's respond?

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3. What does Macbeth imagine he sees in II, i?

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4. How do Macbeth and Lady Macbeth murder Duncan?

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5. What prevented Lady Macbeth from committing the murder herself while she had the opportunity?

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6. What unusual things happened on the night of Duncan's murder?

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7. What other pieces of information are revealed in Act II?

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**Macbeth**

## ACT III

**Comprehension**

1. What is revealed in Banquo's opening soliloquy?

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2. What exactly does Macbeth fear about Banquo?

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3. Outline the sequence of ideas that Macbeth follows, using his perspective, in persuading the Murderers to kill Duncan.

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4. To what extent does the assassination succeed?

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5. What are the events of the play that Lennox reiterates?

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6. Where are Malcolm and Macduff? What are they doing?

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7. What are conditions like in Scotland under Macbeth's reign? How do you know?

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**Macbeth**

## ACT IV

**Comprehension**

1. What are the three apparitions that Macbeth sees? What does each prophecy?

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2. What does Lady Macduff confess to feeling about her husband?

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3. Why has Macduff come to England?

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4. What is Malcolm's reason for claiming that he would be a worse ruler than Macbeth?

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5. What two things convince Malcolm of Macduff's loyalty and sincerity?

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**Reader Response**

1. How does the slaughter of Macduff's family change or reinforce your opinion of Macbeth?

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2. Are Lady Macduff and her son sympathetic characters? Why or why not?

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**Macbeth**

## ACT V

**Comprehension**

1. What is the gist of Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking episodes?

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2. What does the Doctor mean when he tells the Gentlewoman, "Go to, go to; you have known what you should not," and later, "I think, but dare not speak"?

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3. Who is specifically mentioned as not being on the rolls of nobles ready to fight Macbeth?

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4. How does Angus characterize Macbeth's supporters?

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5. Which two of the apparitions' prophecies give Macbeth his extreme confidence at the beginning of scene iii?

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6. What regret does Macbeth confess to in this scene?

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7. What does Malcolm instruct the soldiers to do at Birnam Wood?

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