Record your answers on a separate sheet of paper. Be sure to use complete sentences.

**Act 1, Sc. 1**

1. What mood is established in this opening scene? How does Shakespeare establish this mood?

2. Early in the scene, Horatio, one of Hamlet’s friends, cracks a small joke to show the watchmen (and the audience) that his heart is not fully into joining the ghost-hunt. Write the line that an actor portraying Horatio should read wryly.

3. Horatio was a skeptic, but he is quickly convinced that King Hamlet’s ghost is walking the grounds of Elsinore castle. What two distinctive things about the ghost convince him that he is seeing King Hamlet’s ghost and not just any ordinary ghost? Write the line numbers from where you found this information.

4. Aside from the ghost sightings that have happened two nights in a row, why is a strict watch being maintained outside Elsinore?

5. Horatio, an educated young man, likely studied the history of ancient Rome. He says that the appearance of this ghost reminds him of odd occurrences in Rome shortly before the assassination of Julius Caesar. Look back over Horatio’s passage that begins, “A mote it is to trouble the mind’s eye,” and describe three things that Horatio says happened in Rome just prior to Caesar’s death.

6. What element toward the end of the scene could be read as foreshadowing of tragedy?

7. What was the outcome of the conflict between King Hamlet and King Fortinbras of Norway?

8. At the end of the scene, why do the men decide to go find young Hamlet, the prince of Denmark, and tell him about the ghost?

**Act 1, Sc. 2**

1. Look at the first section of lines we hear from King Claudius, Hamlet’s uncle/step-father. What should rub you the wrong way about the King’s message to the court? Write a specific passage from the section of Lines 1-16 and explain what bothers you about the passage.

2. At the end of this passage, King Claudius says, “So much for him.” The use of the “him” pronoun is interesting here because it creates a double-meaning in the line. Which two different men might the King be referring to? What does each of the two different readings of the line show us about King Claudius?

3. King Claudius sends a letter to the King of Norway to tell young Fortinbras to back off from his plans to attack Denmark. What makes the audience think that this letter/request will not be effective?

4. Hamlet uses a subtle pun to express his displeasure at having Claudius as his new father. Write the line that includes the pun.

5. Look at King Claudius’ passage that begins, “’Tis sweet and commendable in your nature, Hamlet.” List four of the reasons that he says Hamlet ought to stop grieving. What do you think of Claudius’ arguments?

6. Claudius agrees to send Laertes, a young nobleman and son of a trusted advisor, back to France, yet he wants Hamlet to stay put at Elsinore castle and not return to school in Wittenberg. Why, do you suppose, Claudius wants to keep Hamlet close?

7. Hamlet is more than just a little depressed. He is heartbroken, devastated not only by the death of his father but also the alarmingly fast nuptials of his mother. Write the line that shows us he wishes he could die, just to end the pain he’s feeling.

8. How long has it been since King Hamlet died? How long after the funeral did Queen Gertrude marry Claudius, her brother-in-law? Did Gertrude love her first husband, Hamlet? What makes you think this?

9. Hamlet says he must “hold his tongue” and not discuss his displeasure about the marriage with anyone, including his mother. Why, do you suppose, he feels he can’t talk about his feelings with his mother? If your own mother married one of your uncles or a close family friend just a month after your father’s death, what would you think? What would you say to your mom?

10. When Horatio and the guards tell Hamlet about the ghost of his father, he is intrigued and promises to join them in hopes of contacting the ghost again this evening. Hamlet asks the men to keep this a secret. Why?
Act 1, Sc. 3
1. What is Laertes’ advice to his sister, Ophelia, in regards to Hamlet? What reason does he give?
2. What's Ophelia’s response to her brother?
3. Look over Polonius’ famous monologue in which he gives his son, Laertes, many pieces of advice. In your own words, write down six of the bits of wisdom Polonius wants Laertes to remember as he faces the world.
4. What's one bit of life wisdom that you value that Polonius did not include in his advice to Laertes? Write down your own piece of advice to any young adult about to leave home.
5. In his advice for his daughter, Polonius echoes the concerns of Laertes, while still having a little fun with word-play. Look at Polonius’ lines near the end of the scene that begin, “Marry, I will teach you!” Examine and explain the three different ways Polonius gives meaning to the word “tender/tenders” in this passage.
6. What does Ophelia’s response to her father show us about her character?
7. Hamlet is dealing with his grief and rage about his father, mother, and uncle/step-father. How, do you suppose, might Ophelia’s obedience to her father’s command affect him?

Act 1, Sc. 4
1. While Hamlet is out with Horatio and the guards looking for the ghost of King Hamlet, what is King Claudius doing? Why does Hamlet find this offensive?
2. Look closely at the passage of Hamlet’s lines that begin, “So oft it chances in particular men...,” and end with, “to his own scandal.” Summarize what he means in your own words. Then, explain the point Hamlet is making about how society judges people.
3. When Hamlet sees the ghost of his father, he says, “It will not speak. I will follow it.” Why, do you suppose, Hamlet refers to the ghost as “it” instead of “him?”
4. Why don’t Hamlet’s friends want him to follow the ghost?
5. Why isn’t Hamlet afraid of being harmed by the ghost?
6. When he decides to follow the ghost, Hamlet says that “each petty artery in this body” is “as hardy as the Nemean lion’s nerve.” Look to your footnotes or an online search to explain Hamlet’s allusion to Greek mythology here. Explain the Nemean lion’s role in mythology and then explain why this is an interesting simile for Hamlet to use.
7. At the end of the scene, the famous line, “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark,” is delivered. Who says this line? What, in general terms, might it mean if someone used this phrase today to describe a situation?

Act 1, Sc. 5
1. What do most people think was the cause of King Hamlet’s death? What was the actual cause of his death?
2. What does the ghost want Hamlet to do?
3. What is Hamlet’s response to this request?
4. When King Hamlet was alive, did he live a life free of sin? Cite a passage that leads you to this conclusion.
5. King Hamlet’s ghost tells us that he was killed when his brother dropped poison into his ear. Metaphorically, what might be Shakespeare’s message to us about the power of words?
6. What does the ghost want to have happen to Queen Gertrude? Why, do you suppose, this is the ghost’s instruction to Hamlet?
7. Why, do you suppose, Hamlet swears his friends to secrecy?
8. When Hamlet tells his friends that he will likely put on “an antic disposition,” what do you think he means? Look up the definition of “antic” and record the word’s definition. From this, what do you think Hamlet’s strategy is going to be in terms of dealing with his murderous uncle?
9. Look at the last few lines of this scene. Hamlet says, “O cursed spite that ever I was born to set it right!” From this line, it’s clear that Hamlet believes in the idea of fate/destiny. How would such a belief affect Hamlet’s behaviors? Do you believe in the idea of fate or destiny? Explain your answer.
Act 2, Sc. 1
1. What's the specific job Polonius gives to Reynaldo at the beginning of this scene? Is Polonius being a good dad when he assigns this task? Explain your answer.

2. Describe what Hamlet does when he enters Ophelia's room. Why, do you suppose, Hamlet chose Ophelia to be the first person to whom he reveals his new, strange behavior?

3. According to Polonius, what is the force that causes the most insanity/self-destruction in the world? Write the line that show you this.

4. What recent actions by Ophelia does Polonius believe have led to Hamlet's insanity? What do Ophelia's actions show us about her character?

5. Why does Polonius want to tell King Claudius and Queen Gertrude about Hamlet's odd behavior?

Act 2, Sc. 2
1. Explain how the request of Claudius and Gertrude upon Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is similar to the mission given to Reynaldo by Polonius in the last scene. What point is Shakespeare making to the audience here?

2. How has the problem with young Fortinbras been solved? Do you think King Claudius should give permission for young Fortinbras to pass through Denmark on his way to attack Poland? Why or why not?

3. Early in the scene, Polonius delivers this famous line: “...brevity is the soul of wit.” What’s ironic about this?

4. Find and write down a line from Polonius that shows that he has a large ego.

5. Polonius is so certain that he is correct about the source of Hamlet’s insanity that he points to his head and shoulders and says, “Take this from this, if this be otherwise,” meaning he should be killed if he’s wrong. Given that we know the truth about Hamlet and given that this is a famous tragedy, what do you suppose is going to happen to Polonius by the end of this play?

6. What is Polonius’ plan to find out if Hamlet is truly love-crazed over Ophelia?

7. While talking to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet says this famous line: “...for there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so.” What do you think of Hamlet’s philosophy here? Is he right or wrong? Explain your thoughts and be sure to use a modern example to prove your point.

8. Shakespeare uses a lighter moment in this scene to make fun of the London theater scene of his own time. What’s the troubling trend in stage productions in the late 1500’s that Shakespeare doesn’t like?

9. Why is Hamlet’s choice of hearing the speech about Pyrrhus, Priam, and Hecuba an interesting choice?

10. What’s the name of the play that Hamlet has requested the acting troupe to perform the following night? What’s Hamlet’s plan to make the play even more-closely parallel the murderous actions of his uncle?

11. Why does the actor’s crying bother Hamlet?

12. In Act I, Scene 5, Hamlet said, “It is an honest ghost.” Yet in this scene, he says, “The spirit that I have seen may be the devil.” What has evidently happened as Hamlet has thought about the strange events?
Act 3, Sc. 1

1. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern don’t have much helpful information to share with the royal couple, so King Claudius and Polonius move forward with their plan to spy on Hamlet and Ophelia. Right before Hamlet enters, Polonius says that people who are sinners often use “devotion’s visage and pious action” to “sugar o’er the devil himself.” What does Polonius mean?

2. Claudius replies to Polonius’ statement with a brief aside comment. In this passage, to what does Claudius compare himself? Why is this an apt comparison? What does this show us about Claudius’ state of mind?

3. In Hamlet’s famous “To be or not to be” soliloquy, what is his main point/idea?

4. In his soliloquy, Hamlet briefly lists an assortment of pains that people have to endure in their daily lives. In your own words, list four of the indignities that Hamlet mentions.

5. As he’s finishing his speech, Hamlet says, “Thus conscience does make cowards of us all, and thus the native hue of resolution is sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought...” He’s speaking in general terms about mankind here, but this line also directly applies to his own life. How so? Explain.

6. While Hamlet is talking to Ophelia, he loses his cool and rails against women, saying, “God hath given you one face and you make yourselves another. You jig, you amble, and you lisp; you nickname God’s creatures and make your wantoness your ignorance. Go to, I’ll no more on’t! It hath made me mad.” While we’d all likely agree that he’s being unreasonably harsh with Ophelia, let’s look at his greater message about the nature of women. Is there any truth to any of his complaints? Explain your thoughts about this passage.

7. What line shows us that Hamlet suspects he’s being spied on by Polonius?

8. What line shows us that Hamlet suspects he’s being spied on by King Claudius, as well?

9. At the end of the scene, what does Claudius want to do with Hamlet? What is Polonius’ suggestion?

Act 3, Sc. 2

1. At the beginning of this scene, Shakespeare gives the audience a glimpse into his true feelings about actors and audiences through the words of Hamlet. Paraphrase Hamlet’s message about these two groups from his first paragraph of the scene. Then, explain what’s humorous about Shakespeare’s opinion of the groundlings in his audience, given the timeless popularity of this play.

2. According to Hamlet, why is a compliment given to a poor person more valuable than one given to a nobleman?

3. Of all of the characters in the play, which one does Hamlet trust the most? How do you know this? Write a line from the play that serves as evidence for your conclusion.

4. When Hamlet speaks to King Claudius, he equates himself with a chameleon in a string of babble that the king doesn’t understand. Why is a chameleon an interesting comparison for Hamlet to make?

5. Polonius tells us that, in college, he played the role of Julius Caesar, the emperor of Rome who was assassinated by men he thought were his friends. How might this be an element of foreshadowing in this play?

6. Hamlet makes the murderer in the play the king’s nephew, not his brother. Give two reasons why Hamlet may have made this choice.

7. In The Murder of Gonzago, the queen character says that a second marriage would only ever be for this one reason. What’s the reason?

8. In criticizing the performance of the queen in the play, Queen Gertrude says, “The lady doth protest too much, methinks.” What does this famous line mean?

9. While talking to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet compares himself to a recorder. In what way is Hamlet like this musical instrument?

10. Toward the end of the scene, Hamlet mentions to Polonius that he sees the shape of a camel, a weasel, and a whale in the clouds. What’s Hamlet doing here? What does this brief bit show us about Polonius?

11. In the soliloquy at the end of the scene, what power does Hamlet seek in his own heart?
Act 3, Sc. 3
1. In King Claudius’ soliloquy, we learn that he feels guilty, but isn’t willing to give up the prizes he’s won from committing the murder of his brother. What’s your opinion of Claudius? Give reasoning for your answer.

2. Hamlet sneaks up on Claudius while the king is in the midst of praying and decides this is not the time to kill his uncle. Why? When, according to Hamlet, would be a better time to kill the king?

3. What’s your opinion about Hamlet’s decision to not kill his uncle in this scene? Do you agree with his logic or do you think this is another example of Hamlet’s inability to move forward with his plan? Explain your answer.

Act 3, Sc. 4
1. Some critics suspect that Gertrude was wooed by Claudius before the death of King Hamlet and may have even played a part in his murder. Other scholars argue that this is not correct and that Gertrude was won by Claudius only after her husband’s death. On which side of this debate do you agree? Give evidence to explain your stance.

2. Where is Polonius when he is killed by Hamlet? What’s symbolically interesting about this?

3. What two things does Hamlet command his mother NOT to do? Do you think Gertrude will obey Hamlet’s commands? Why or why not?

4. Look closely at the last paragraph of the scene. What, do you suppose, is Hamlet’s plan in terms of traveling to England with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern?
Act 4, Sc. 1
1. What is Claudius’ reaction when he’s told of Polonius’ death? What does this show us about his feelings toward Polonius, one of his closest allies?
2. When does King Claudius plan to launch Hamlet’s ship to England? Why the hurry?
3. In trying to protect Hamlet, Queen Gertrude tells Claudius that Hamlet “weeps for what is done.” There is a double-meaning in this line. Explain the two meanings.
4. What unpleasant task does the King give to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern?
5. Why can’t Claudius just announce to everyone that Hamlet killed Polonius and have him put on trial?

Act 4, Sc. 2
1. What is Hamlet’s point in comparing Rosencrantz to a sponge?
2. Hamlet says that “a knavish speech sleeps in a foolish ear.” Given that “knавish” means “dishonest,” who is the knave and who is the fool? Explain your answer.
3. Read Hamlet’s last line in the scene. Do you think he says this seriously and goes with the men to see the king? Or do you think he says this playfully and runs away, making the men chase him? Upon what do you base your answer?

Act 4, Sc. 3
1. At the beginning of the scene, what’s ironic about Claudius’ criticism of the Danish people?
2. According to Hamlet, why does he think worms are the most powerful when it comes to the food chain?
3. When Claudius asks Hamlet about the location of Polonius’ body, Hamlet says that Polonius is in “heaven. Send hither to see. If your messenger find him not there, seek him i’ th’ other place yourself.” What is Hamlet really saying to Claudius here?
4. Why does Hamlet call Claudius “mother” instead of “father?”
5. Look at the last passage in this scene. Claudius has written a letter to the King of England. What is Claudius’ command?

Act 4, Sc. 4
1. What is Hamlet’s opinion of the battle about to be struck between Fortinbras and the Polish soldiers over an undesirable stretch of land?
2. Examine Hamlet’s soliloquy and explain how Fortinbras unknowingly becomes Hamlet’s motivation to return to Denmark and take his revenge against Claudius.
**Act 4, Sc. 5**
1. Describe Ophelia’s recent odd behavior.
2. Queen Gertrude doesn’t want to see Ophelia, but relents. Why?
3. What are the two subjects of the songs Ophelia sings for Gertrude and Claudius? What does Claudius think has caused her mental illness? What do you think has also contributed to her pain?
4. Explain how the reactions of Ophelia and Laertes to their father’s murder are used to mirror and amplify Hamlet’s reaction to King Hamlet’s murder.

**Act 4, Sc. 6**
1. Explain what happened while Hamlet was at sea, sailing to England.
2. A deus ex machina occurs when a writer uses an unexpected or unlikely event to resolve a situation in his story. Explain how the interference of the pirate ship is a deus ex machina. Does this add to the drama of the story for you or take away from the impact? By contrasting the behavior of the pirates with the behavior of the royal family of Denmark, what interesting statement does Shakespeare seem to be making?

**Act 4, Sc. 7**
1. Laertes accepts Claudius’ statement that Hamlet is their mutual enemy, but Laertes wonders why Claudius didn’t take action against Hamlet sooner. What are the two reasons that Claudius gives to explain his inaction in punishing Hamlet?
2. Laertes is well-known for having skill in a particular sport. What is it? How will this factor into Claudius’ plan to have Hamlet killed and make it look like an accident?
3. Just in case the first plan doesn’t work, what is Claudius’ back-up plan to ensure that Hamlet dies at the duel?
4. What’s interesting about Claudius’ preferred method of killing people? What does this show us about the man?

**Helena Bonham Carter**

**Mariah Gale**

**Kate Winslet**

**5. Describe the scene of Ophelia’s drowning. Do you think her death was an accident or a suicide? Explain your reasoning.**

**6. What lie does Claudius tell Gertrude at the end of this scene? What idea does this reinforce?**

*Ophelia,*
by Sir John Everett Millais, 1851-1852
This famous painting was recently valued at $49 million and can be seen at the Tate Britain, a museum in London.
Act 5, Sc. 1
1. At the beginning of the scene, two “clowns,” or gravediggers, are talking about Ophelia’s death. Why is one of the gravediggers irritated that Ophelia will be given a Christian burial in the graveyard?

2. In your own words, retell one of the jokes or one of the puns told by the gravediggers.

3. Why would Shakespeare open the final act of this tragedy with the comic banter between the gravediggers and Hamlet?

4. In criticizing the elite class, Hamlet says, “The hand of little employment hath the daintier sense.” What does he mean?

5. Find Shakespeare’s joke about his fellow Englishmen. Paraphrase the passage that likely would’ve made his Elizabethan audience chuckle.

6. According to the text, how old is Hamlet? Does this sound right to you? Based on what you know about Hamlet and his family, how old do you think he is? Explain your reasoning.

7. Who was Yorick? To Hamlet, how is this man just the same as Alexander the Great?

8. What lines show that Polonius was wrong about his advice to Ophelia that Hamlet was out of her league/social class?

9. What is the priest’s attitude about giving Christian burial rites to Ophelia? What is Laertes’ response to the priest?

10. Hamlet is irritated by Laertes’ heavy show of grief and says that he loved Ophelia more than 40,000 brothers could have loved her. List four of the things Hamlet says he’s willing to do to prove that his love for Ophelia was stronger than Laertes’ love.

11. Thinking back over what you know about Hamlet and Ophelia’s relationship, do you think Hamlet really loved Ophelia? Defend your answer.

Act 5, Sc. 2
1. Hamlet explains the contents of the letter he wrote to the King of England using Claudius’ name. Later, we find out that Hamlet’s orders were followed and that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead. Did these two men deserve to die? Explain your thoughts.

2. Why does Hamlet toy with Osric, making him agree that the weather is hot then cold and then hot again? This passage echoes a scene between Hamlet and which other character from earlier in the play? What is Hamlet’s point here?

3. Horatio urges Hamlet not to duel Laertes, but Hamlet proceeds despite his misgivings. How does his willingness to fight Laertes prove to us that Hamlet is changed and finally ready to fulfill his destiny as a tragic hero?

4. At what point does Gertrude realize Claudius’ treachery?

5. What is Laertes’ dying request of Hamlet?

6. What is the means of Claudius’ death? Did you find his death satisfying? Why or why not?

7. What is Hamlet’s dying request of Horatio?

8. As he dies, Hamlet says that young Fortinbras has his vote to be the next ruler of Denmark. Why, do you suppose, Hamlet holds so much respect for Fortinbras?

9. Including King Hamlet, how many characters die in this play? What message can the audience take away from this tragedy?
Act 1, Sc. 1

1. What mood is established in this opening scene? How does Shakespeare establish this mood? The mood is dark, creepy, and sinister. Shakespeare establishes this mood by setting the opening scene of this tragic play just after midnight. There are three scared watchmen and a skeptical friend of Hamlet’s out on the watch, participating in a ghost-hunt. The audience should feel the tension right away and the cold weather reflects the mood.

2. Early in the scene, Horatio, one of Hamlet’s friends, cracks a small joke to show the watchmen (and the audience) that his heart is not fully into joining the ghost-hunt. Write the line that an actor portraying Horatio should read wryly.

   The joke is when Horatio is asked if he is there and he says, “A piece of him.” Here, Horatio uses humor to show that he doesn’t want to be out in the cold in the middle of the night with a couple of guards who think they’ve seen a ghost. We should chuckle here, since he’s suggesting that the rest of him wants to be back in his warm bed.

3. Horatio was a skeptic, but he is quickly convinced that King Hamlet’s ghost is walking the grounds of Elsinore castle. What two distinctive things about the ghost convince him that he is seeing King Hamlet’s ghost and not just any ordinary ghost? Write the line numbers from where you found this information.

   In Lines 72-75 of the Folger Library edition, Horatio says that he recognized the armor the ghost was wearing as the same armor that King Hamlet wore when he battled the former leader of Norway, Fortinbras Sr. He also noticed that the ghost frowned in just the same way as the old King frowned when he had to battle a group of Polish soldiers on an icy terrain.

4. Aside from the ghost sightings that have happened two nights in a row, why is a strict watch being maintained outside Elsinore castle? The guards have heard that young Fortinbras of Norway is planning an attack on Elsinore. The guards are working to protect the royals of Denmark from the feared attack as Fortinbras launches a scheme to win back the lands that were lost by his father.

5. Horatio, an educated young man, likely studied the history of ancient Rome. He says that the appearance of this ghost reminds him of odd occurrences in Rome shortly before the assassination of Julius Caesar. Look back over Horatio’s passage that begins, “A mote it is to trouble the mind’s eye,” and describe three things that Horatio says happened in Rome just prior to Caesar’s death. Answers should include that the graveyards were empty because the corpses/ghosts left their resting spots to wander around the streets of Rome, there were memorable meteor showers, the morning dew appeared to be made out of blood, the sun looked like it had a scary face, and the moon was almost in a complete eclipse. Emphasize in this passage that Horatio and people of his time believed the natural world would react dramatically when the world of man was in upheaval or filled with sin. These were all signs that something is wrong in the world, and Horatio is now worried about the state/future of Denmark.

6. What element toward the end of the scene could be read as foreshadowing of tragedy? When Horatio tries to converse with the ghost, he asks the ghost to speak if any good can come out of this visit, but the ghost is silent, refusing to speak. He asks the ghost to speak to him if there’s anything that could be helpful to the state of Denmark, but the ghost is silent. Finally, he asks if there’s any hidden treasure that the ghost wants to disclose the location of, but the ghost continues to withdraw. The ghost is here for an entirely different reason than the ones mentioned by Horatio and there’s no good that’s going to come to the people of Denmark.

7. What was the outcome of the conflict between King Hamlet and King Fortinbras of Norway? King Hamlet won and took ownership of lands that used to belong to King Fortinbras and Norway. Hamlet was the victor and killed Fortinbras. Now, Fortinbras’ son, also named Fortinbras, wants revenge and plans to reclaim his father’s old lands.

8. At the end of the scene, why do the men decide to go find young Hamlet, the prince of Denmark, and tell him about the ghost? They think the ghost has a message to deliver and suppose the ghost will be more willing to talk to Hamlet, his son.

Act 1, Sc. 2

1. Look at the first section of lines we hear from King Claudius, Hamlet’s uncle/step-father. What should rub you the wrong way about the King’s message to the court? Write a specific passage from the section of Lines 1-16 and explain what bothers you about the passage. In his address to the court, Claudius speaks about grieving over his dead brother, but in the very same breath he describes his joy at marrying his sister-in-law. It’s gross and his grief over King Hamlet seems insincere. Students will choose a variety of lines, but one that is especially icky in found in Line 22 when Claudius speaks of their grief-stained courtship. He says he and Queen Gertrude had “mirth in funeral” and “dirge
in marriage.” This means that they were flirting at the funeral. Again, ick. We in the audience should be feeling what Hamlet’s feeling in this moment – disgust.

2. At the end of this passage, King Claudius says, “So much for him.” The use of the “him” pronoun is interesting here because it creates a double-meaning in the line. Which two different men might the King be referring to? What does each of the two different readings of the line show us about King Claudius? The “him” in the line could mean young Fortinbras, as most of the court would assume, or it could refer to the closest antecedent/noun, which is the “most valiant brother,” King Hamlet. If the reader thinks that Claudius means young Fortinbras, then it is clear that Claudius feels confident about his own military power and is even a bit arrogant. If the reader thinks that Claudius means his brother, then he is being callous and it should suggest a heartlessness to the reader. At the end of this scene, Hamlet begins to suspect foul play against his father and this line could be read as evidence to support that suspicion.

3. King Claudius sends a letter to the King of Norway to tell young Fortinbras to back off from his plans to attack Denmark. What makes the audience think that this letter/request will not be effective? Claudius says that the current King of Norway is “impotent and bedrid” and that he is unaware of young Fortinbras’ actions. A ruler who is so out-of-touch likely doesn’t have much real power, so the audience should remain concerned that the threat from Norway will continue to be a factor in this story.

4. Hamlet uses a subtle pun to express his displeasure at having Claudius as his new father. Write the line that includes the pun. In Line 70 of the Folger edition, Claudius asks Hamlet, “How is it that the clouds still hang on you?” Then, in Line 71, Hamlet uses the pun, saying, “Not so, my lord. I am too much i’ the sun.” This means, of course, that he doesn’t like being referred to as “son” by Claudius, which happens three lines earlier in Line 67.

5. Look at King Claudius’ passage that begins, “’Tis sweet and commendable in your nature, Hamlet.” List four of the reasons that Claudius says Hamlet ought to stop grieving. What do you think of Claudius’ arguments?

1. Claudius tells Hamlet that it’s natural for a father to die and that life goes on. 2. He calls Hamlet’s grief “unmanly,” meaning that Hamlet is acting too girlish with all of this depression and moping around. This builds on his characterization of Hamlet as “sweet” in the earlier line and we realize that Claudius does not mean this as a compliment. 3. He says Hamlet is acting against God’s plan; there’s a season for grieving, but that season has passed. 4. He says that continuing to grieve like this shows that Hamlet has a weak heart and mind. In the audience, we should be offended by Claudius’ comments, since they are criticisms and veiled insults. “Get over it” and “man up” are not appropriate things to say to someone struggling with the loss of a beloved parent.

6. Claudius agrees to send Laertes, a young nobleman and son of a trusted advisor, back to France, yet he wants Hamlet to stay put at Elsinore castle and not return to school in Wittenberg. Why, do you suppose, Claudius wants to keep Hamlet close? Students’ answers will vary, but it should be clear to the class that Claudius does not have Hamlet’s best interests at heart. It’s most likely that Claudius wants to keep an eye on Hamlet, who has a legitimate claim to the throne. Some more-cynical (and correct) students might also suspect that Claudius intends to have Hamlet killed in the future.

7. Hamlet is more than just a little depressed. He is heartbroken, devastated not only by the death of his father but also the alarmingly fast nuptials of his mother. Write the line that shows us he wishes he could die, just to end the pain he’s feeling. Two lines promote the idea that Hamlet has begun to think about suicide. In Lines 135-136 of the Folger edition, he says, “O that this too too solid flesh would melt, Thaw and resolve itself into dew.” He wishes he could just evaporate/disappear. Students will also likely notice Lines 137-138: “Or that the Everlasting had not fixed His canon ’gainst self-slaughter!” He wishes it weren’t a sin to kill himself. These are heavy thoughts for a young man to be having. (Note: This religious law will be a factor in Ophelia’s burial later in the play, but I, of course, don’t mention this yet to my classes.)

8. How long has it been since King Hamlet died? How long after the funeral did Queen Gertrude marry Claudius, her brother-in-law? Did Queen Gertrude love her first husband, Hamlet? What makes you think this? King Hamlet died a little less than two months ago. Gertrude and Claudius married about a month after the funeral. Answers to the last two questions will vary and always make for a compelling classroom debate. Expect students to begin to speculate about Gertrude’s reasons for hooking up with Claudius. I always like to remind the class that ALL of these thoughts/ideas/suspicions are running through Hamlet’s head, too.

9. Hamlet says he must “hold his tongue” and not discuss his displeasure about the marriage with anyone, including his mother. Why, do you suppose, he feels he can’t talk about his feelings with his mother? If your own mother married
one of your uncles or a close family friend just a month after your father’s death, what would you think? What would you say to your mom? Students will likely realize that Hamlet views his mother as weak (“Frailty, thy name is woman!”) and that there’s nothing he can do now to change what has happened. Gertrude is also not only his mom, but the queen and he would be unwise to disrespect the queen. Finally, he must have suspicions about his father’s death, wondering who (Claudius? His own mother?) was in on the plot. He doesn’t admire, respect, or trust his mother right now. Students’ answers to the last two questions are always interesting and worthy of class discussion.

10. When Horatio and the guards tell Hamlet about the ghost of his father, he is intrigued and promises to join them in hopes of contacting the ghost again this evening. Hamlet asks the men to keep this a secret. Why? He hopes the ghost will lead him to evidence that will help reveal the identity of the murderer. Interestingly, no one here seems too concerned that people will think they’re crazy because they are seeing a ghost. This emphasizes the point made earlier in the play when talking about Julius Caesar that the natural world likes to get involved in the affairs of mankind.

Act 1, Sc. 3
1. What is Laertes’ advice to his sister, Ophelia, in regards to Hamlet? What reason does he give? He tells her not to fall for Hamlet’s sweet talk because he’s a servant of the country and will have to marry whomever best fits his role as Prince of Denmark, and that woman will not be Ophelia. He’s worried that Ophelia will be sexually used by Hamlet and then dumped. He doesn’t want a love affair with Hamlet to leave her heartbroken and bitter.
2. What’s Ophelia’s response to her brother? She says she’ll keep his advice close to her heart. She also, though, chides her brother not to a hypocrite. She says he needs to be careful in his love affairs in France, too.
3. Look over Polonius’ famous monologue in which he gives his son, Laertes, many pieces of advice. In your own words, write down six of the bits of wisdom Polonius wants Laertes to remember as he faces the world. Students need to record at least six of the following: 1. Don’t always say what you’re thinking. 2. Don’t act on unwise thoughts. 3. Be friendly to people, but don’t be overly friendly/obnoxious. 4. Once a friend has proven himself loyal to you, keep him close and value that rare friendship. 5. Don’t waste your time shaking hands and trying to befriend every new person you meet. 6. Try to avoid being in a fight, but once you’re in a fight you need to be intimidating. 7. Listen to many people, but don’t be the one to talk so much. 8. Hear everyone’s opinion, but reserve your own judgment. 9. Spend all you can afford on clothes, but buy quality items instead of being fashionable. Clothes make the man, especially in France, where you’re going. 10. Don’t borrow money and don’t lend it. When you lend money to a friend, you often lose the friendship as well as the money. If you borrow money, you’ll spend it in irresponsible ways. 11. Above all, be true to yourself. If you’re true to yourself, then you can’t be fake with other people.
4. What’s one bit of life wisdom that you value that Polonius did not include in his advice to Laertes? Write down your own piece of advice to any young adult about to leave home. Students’ answers will vary. This often makes for a fun class discussion.
5. In his advice for his daughter, Polonius echoes the concerns of Laertes, while still having a little fun with word-play. Look at Polonius’ lines near the end of the scene that begin, “Marry, I will teach you!” Examine and explain the three different ways Polonius gives meaning to the word “tender/tenders” in this passage. Since Ophelia has referred to Hamlet’s flirtations as “tenders,” her father uses that meaning first. Then, he uses the word “tender” as a verb, meaning to offer as payment. Finally, he uses “tender” as a synonym for “make” in the last line, meaning she’ll make him look like a fool if his daughter is romantically used and dumped by the prince. Ah, puns are fun!
6. What does Ophelia’s response to her father show us about her character? She’s a meek, dutiful daughter. We should have the sense here that she will obey him.
7. Hamlet is dealing with his grief and rage about his father, mother, and uncle/step-father. How, do you suppose, might Ophelia’s obedience to her father’s command affect him? Students’ answers will vary, but this will likely be another brick in the wall of his mental collapse. I like to remind students how devastated they would feel if a blooming love affair of their own were suddenly cut off. No one likes to be dumped and that alone can make us feel sad, alone, and desperate.

Act 1, Sc. 4
1. While Hamlet is out with Horatio and the guards looking for the ghost of King Hamlet, what is King Claudius doing? Why does Hamlet find this offensive? Claudius is up late drinking heavily and hosting a loud party. We should
be offended because this should still be a somber time of grief for the passing of the king. Hamlet is also annoyed because such loud antics reflect poorly on the royals of Denmark, who have a sour reputation amongst other nations as being people who like to drink to excess. Hamlet thinks this makes all of them look bad.

2. Look closely at the passage of Hamlet’s lines that begin, “So oft it chances in particular men...,” and end with, “to his own scandal.” Summarize what he means in your own words. Then, explain the point Hamlet is making about how society judges people. In the passage, Hamlet says that this bad habit of occasionally getting drunk is a lot like a birth defect in another man. In such a man, he can’t be to blame for some small defect that he received when he was born, yet the world ignores all of the good such a man does and focuses instead on the one small defect. He’s saying that the world views the royal family of Denmark in this way. They do so much good, but one small flaw will be what most people talk about. In terms of society, he’s saying that we tend to focus myopically on the small flaw in someone’s character and we ignore the greater good of the man.

3. When Hamlet sees the ghost of his father, he says, “It will not speak. I will follow it.” Why, do you suppose, Hamlet refers to the ghost as “it” instead of “him?” Answers will vary, but it could be that Hamlet is freaked out that he’s seeing an actual ghost and doesn’t yet fully embrace the idea that this spirit is his actual father.

4. Why don’t Hamlet’s friends want him to follow the ghost? They are worried that the ghost will try to harm Hamlet. Horatio worries that the ghost will trick Hamlet and cause him to hurt himself or that the ghost will drive Hamlet insane. This is ironic, of course, because Hamlet’s already pretty mentally unstable and has already entertained thoughts of hurting himself/suicide.

5. Why isn’t Hamlet afraid of being harmed by the ghost? He doesn’t really care if he lives or dies, so he figures there’s nothing to lose by following the ghost. He’s depressed and desperate. The ghost can’t hurt him anymore than he’s already hurting, he figures.

6. When he decides to follow the ghost, Hamlet says that “each petty artery in this body” is “as hardy as the Nemean lion’s nerve.” Look to your footnotes or an online search to explain Hamlet’s allusion to Greek mythology here. Explain the Nemean lion’s role in mythology and then explain why this is an interesting simile for Hamlet to use. The Nemean lion was a beast that was believed to be invincible, but it was killed by Hercules/Heracles as one of his 12 labors, or challenges, that led him to immortality. Hamlet’s allusion to this epic battle is interesting because he compares himself to the lion, who loses the battle, not to Hercules/Heracles, the victor. This line could be read as an element of foreshadowing.

7. At the end of the scene, the famous line, “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark,” is delivered. Who says this line? What, in general terms, might it mean if someone used this phrase today to describe a situation? Marcellus delivers the line. In general, it means that something’s not right and someone’s probably planning/plotting something sinister. I like to explain to my classes that this line has become so commonly used that it’s almost an idiom. So, when they hear a politician complain about a new piece of legislation, saying, “Something is rotten in the state of Denmark,” they should know it’s an allusion to Hamlet and that the legislator is suggesting corruption or something of that sort.

Act 1, Sc. 5

1. What do most people think was the cause of King Hamlet’s death? What was the actual cause of his death? Everyone’s been told that he was bitten by a snake while he was napping in his orchard. This is not true. The snake was his brother, Claudius, who poured poison in his ear.

2. What does the ghost want Hamlet to do? The ghost wants Hamlet to take revenge against Claudius and kill him.

3. What is Hamlet’s response to this request? He willingly and eagerly agrees.

4. When King Hamlet was alive, did he live a life free of sin? Cite a passage that leads you to this conclusion. No, the ghost admits that he was a sinner. He says he was killed by his brother “even in the blossoms of my sin, unhous’led, disappointed, unaneled, no reck’ning made, but sent to my account with all my imperfections on my head.” He means that he was killed before he could go to confession at church and pay penance for his sins.

5. King Hamlet’s ghost tells us that he was killed when his brother dropped poison into his ear. Metaphorically, what might be Shakespeare’s message to us about the power of words? Students’ answers will vary, but rumors/gossip can be powerful tools to ruin someone’s peace of mind. It’s interesting that of all of the ways that Shakespeare could have chosen to have King Hamlet killed, he chose this symbolically loaded method. We ought to be very careful about the words we allow to fill our heads. I also like to have students notice the numerous times allusions to ears and hearing
are made in the play. This motif would serve as material for an excellent end-of-unit writing assignment, should you so choose.

6. What does the ghost want to have happen to Queen Gertrude? Why, do you suppose, this is the ghost’s instruction to Hamlet? The ghost tells Hamlet not to take action against Gertrude and, instead, to let God be the judge of her actions. Students’ answers to the second question will vary, but it’s likely that the ghost views Gertrude as weak/easily manipulated and, therefore, not as culpable as Claudius. It also could be that the ghost still loves his wife and doesn’t want to directly play a role in having harm come to her.

7. Why, do you suppose, Hamlet swears his friends to secrecy? He doesn’t want to give Claudius any inkling that he knows the truth about the murder.

8. When Hamlet tells his friends that he will likely put on “an antic disposition,” what do you think he means? Look up the definition of “antic” and record the word’s definition. From this, what do you think Hamlet’s strategy is going to be in terms of dealing with his murderous uncle? “Antic” means “bizarre” or “grotesque.” So, Hamlet plans to begin acting strangely, possibly like he’s mentally ill. He’ll still be sane, but his mother and uncle won’t know how to handle him. This will give him time to plan his revenge.

9. Look at the last few lines of this scene. Hamlet says, “O cursed spite that ever I was born to set it right!” From this line, it’s clear that Hamlet believes in the idea of fate/destiny. How would such a belief affect Hamlet’s behaviors? Do you believe in the idea of fate or destiny? Explain your answer.

Students’ answers will vary, but it’s reasonable to conclude that if Hamlet believes it’s his destiny to be the one to avenge his father’s death, then he would be able to act without hesitation. (Interesting, this is not the case, but I don’t share this part of the story yet with my classes.) Students’ answers to the last question will vary widely and always make for an interesting class discussion.

Act 2, Sc. 1
1. What’s the specific job Polonius gives to Reynaldo at the beginning of this scene? Is Polonius being a good dad when he assigns this task? Explain your answer. Polonius wants Reynaldo to deliver money and letters to Laertes, who is now in France. He also, though, wants Reynaldo to spy on Laertes and see if he’s up to no good. Polonius is even fine if Reynaldo smears Laertes’ reputation a bit as he tries to earn the trust of Laertes’ friends, whom he hopes will tell Reynaldo about Laertes’ naughty behavior. Students’ answers to the last question will vary. Some will say that an involved parent should check up on his kids, but most students agree that Polonius takes his inquiry too far here.

2. Describe what Hamlet does when he enters Ophelia’s room. Why, do you suppose, Hamlet chose Ophelia to be the first person to whom he reveals his new, strange behavior? He grabs Ophelia by the wrist and stares at her face without speaking for a long time. He nods his head three times and sighs heavily. Then, he stalks out of her room staring at her as he goes. He doesn’t look to see if he’s going to run into any walls or the door; he just keeps staring at Ophelia as he leaves the room. Students’ answers to the last question will vary, but it’s likely that he chose Ophelia because she is young and tender. He knows she would be dramatically affected by such a show. He also might be trying out his “crazy look” before he presents it to the more-cynical adult members of the royal court.

3. According to Polonius, what is the force that causes the most insanity/self-destruction in the world? Write the line that show you this. Polonius says that love is the force that most often causes people to behave in this way. The line that tell us this is: “This is the very ecstasy of love, whose violent property fordoes itself and leads the will to desperate undertakings as oft as any passion under heaven.”

4. What recent actions by Ophelia does Polonius believe have led to Hamlet’s insanity? What do Ophelia’s actions show us about her character? Ophelia sent back love letters that Hamlet tried to have delivered to her and she hasn’t made herself available to be wooed by him. Polonius believes this blocking of love has led to Hamlet’s insanity. This action shows us that Ophelia is a dutiful daughter; she has fully obeyed her father’s instructions without hesitation.

5. Why does Polonius want to tell King Claudius and Queen Gertrude about Hamlet’s odd behavior? He figures that it’s better for them to know that Hamlet’s fallen for someone of a lower rank than to try to hide this development.

Act 2, Sc. 2
1. Explain how the request of Claudius and Gertrude upon Rosencrantz and Guildenstern is similar to the mission given to Reynaldo by Polonius in the last scene. What point is Shakespeare making to the audience here? In both cases, parents are hiring/requesting someone to spy on their children. Shakespeare seems to be critical of parents
here, implying that none of them are truly able to control their adult children. (Interesting, Ophelia serves as an opposite example of this. After her death later in the play, I like to emphasize this point with Shakespeare’s example of what happens to the child who dutifully follows a parent’s instruction/whim. I, of course, don’t mention this yet to my classes.)

2. How has the problem with young Fortinbras been solved? Do you think King Claudius should give permission for young Fortinbras to pass through Denmark on his way to attack Poland? Why or why not? The elder uncle scolded the younger Fortinbras and told him to stop his plans of attacking Denmark. The younger man was given 3,000 crowns to placate him and he vows to leave Denmark alone. Now, the King of Norway has asked that King Claudius allow permission for young Fortinbras to pass through Denmark as he plans to launch an attack against Poland. Students’ answers will vary on the last two questions. Claudius is in a delicate position. If he says no to the request and denies passage, it might alienate the leadership of Norway. If he says yes and allows the Norwegians access to Poland via Denmark, then his people might become targets, too. It could be a trick, allowing your enemy deep into the heart of your country.

3. Early in the scene, Polonius delivers this famous line: “...brevity is the soul of wit.” What’s ironic about this? Polonius is extremely long-winded, so it should amuse the audience that these words come from his lips.

4. Find and write down a line from Polonius that shows that he has a large ego. This line shows that Polonius believes he is always right: “Hath there been such a time – I would fain know that – that I have positively said, ‘Tis so,’ when it proved otherwise?”

5. Polonius is so certain that he is correct about the source of Hamlet’s insanity that he points to his head and shoulders and says, “Take this from this, if this be otherwise,” meaning he should be killed if he’s wrong. Given that we know the truth about Hamlet and given that this is a famous tragedy, what do you suppose is going to happen to Polonius by the end of this play? Obviously, this line is an element of foreshadowing. Most students will accurately guess that Polonius will be killed in this play.

6. What is Polonius’ plan to find out if Hamlet is truly love-crazed over Ophelia? He says he and Claudius should hide behind a curtain/tapestry in the lobby of the castle where Hamlet often likes to take long walks and listen as Hamlet comes across Ophelia there. They basically plan to eavesdrop on Hamlet and Ophelia.

7. While talking to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet says this famous line: “...for there is nothing either good or bad but thinking makes it so.” What do you think of Hamlet’s philosophy here? Is he right or wrong? Explain your thoughts and be sure to use a modern example to prove your point. Students’ answers will vary and this question always makes for an interesting classroom discussion.

8. Shakespeare uses a lighter moment in this scene to make fun of the London theater scene of his own time. What’s the troubling trend in stage productions in the late 1500’s that Shakespeare doesn’t like? He’s irritated by the popular trend of having children serve as actors. Apparently, there was a surge in popularity of productions that cast children, instead of adult actors, in all of the roles. When Rosencrantz tells Hamlet that the boy actors have won over public favor, he says, “Ay, that they do, my lord – Hercules and his load, too.” This is a veiled reference to life at Shakespeare’s Globe Theatre, as Hercules worked with the titan Atlas for a time to hold the weight of the world on his shoulders. This is an inside joke of sorts that modern readers might miss.

9. Why is Hamlet’s choice of hearing the speech about Pyrrhus, Priam, and Hecuba an interesting choice? The Greek tragedy holds parallels for what he wants to do to King Claudius and the grief that Hecuba will feel about seeing her dead husband.

10. What’s the name of the play that Hamlet has requested the acting troupe to perform the following night? What’s Hamlet’s plan to make the play even more-closely parallel the murderous actions of his uncle? Hamlet wants to see a play called, The Murder of Gonzago. He will add a few lines to the original work. Those lines will most likely mimic the specifics of Claudius’ murderous actions against King Hamlet.

11. Why does the actor’s crying bother Hamlet? The actor’s crying emphasizes for Hamlet his own lack of passion and lack of action in moving forward in his plan to kill Claudius. He reasons that a more-passionate man, like this actor, wouldn’t hesitate in the way that he has.

12. In Act I, Scene 5, Hamlet said, “It is an honest ghost.” Yet in this scene, he says, “The spirit that I have seen may be the devil.” What has evidently happened as Hamlet has thought about the strange events? He’s begun to have doubts about moving forward with his plot against Claudius. He knows the ghost is right, but he’s intimidated and somewhat
frozen by his emotions. Murdering someone (even when you are convinced that person deserves to die) is a heavy move. Hamlet’s not quite ready to act, so he says he wants more evidence that will help steel his nerve.

Act 3, Sc. 1
1. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern don’t have much helpful information to share with the royal couple, so King Claudius and Polonius move forward with their plan to spy on Hamlet and Ophelia. Right before Hamlet enters, Polonius says that people who are sinners often use “devotion’s visage and pious action” to “sugar o’er the devil himself.” What does Polonius mean? Polonius means that sinners often act holy and devoted to God when they are really just using their church attendance/religious tokens as a mask to hide their sinful natures.

2. Claudius replies to Polonius’ statement with a brief aside comment. In this passage, to what does Claudius compare himself? Why is this an apt comparison? What does this show us about Claudius’ state of mind? Claudius compares his own guilty conscience to a prostitute’s pockmarked cheek made pretty with make-up. He says he’s disguising such ugliness in his own nature with pretty words. For the king to compare himself in any way to a prostitute is compelling and should give us pause. In many ways, though, this is a sound comparison, as both are liars and both use sex to get what they want. This passage shows us that Claudius feels some degree of guilt for his role in his brother’s murder.

3. In Hamlet’s famous “To be or not to be” soliloquy, what is his main point/idea? He’s wondering whether it’s better to suffer through the hardships of life or just kill oneself and move on to whatever happens to us after we die.

4. In his soliloquy, Hamlet briefly lists an assortment of pains that people have to endure in their daily lives. In your own words, list four of the indignities that Hamlet mentions. Students’ answers should include four of these: the abuse from a boss or manager; the insults of arrogant men; the pangs of unrequited love; the inefficiency of the legal system; the rudeness of people in office; and the mistreatment good people have to accept from bad people.

5. As he’s finishing his speech, Hamlet says, “Thus conscience does make cowards of us all, and thus the native hue of resolution is sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought...” He’s speaking in general terms about mankind here, but this line also directly applies to his own life. How so? Explain. Here, Hamlet speaks about how thinking too much is bad for us, as it inhibits our strong and good natural urges to take action. He has suffered with “over-thinking” the situation with Claudius and has not moved forward/acted. This constant, obsessive thinking about the situation has made him a bit of a coward.

6. While Hamlet is talking to Ophelia, he loses his cool and rails against women, saying, “God hath given you one face and you make yourselves another. You jig, you amble, and you lisp; you nickname God’s creatures and make your wantoness your ignorance. Go to, I’ll no more on’t! It hath made me mad.” While we’d all likely agree that he’s being unreasonably harsh with Ophelia, let’s look at his greater message about the nature of women. Is there any truth to any of his complaints? Explain your thoughts about this passage. Students’ answers will vary and will make for a fiery class discussion. Be sure to link this discussion to Claudius’ line from #2 above.

7. What line shows us that Hamlet suspects he’s being spied on by Polonius? Hamlet abruptly halts in his railing against Ophelia and asks about the location of her father. When he’s told that Polonius is at home, Hamlet says, “Let the doors be shut upon him, that he may play the fool nowhere but in’s own house.” Hamlet’s being cheeky.

8. What line shows us that Hamlet suspects he’s being spied on by King Claudius, as well? Hamlet says, “Those that are married already – all but one – shall live; the rest shall keep as they are.” This is a veiled threat against Claudius that the audience will understand, even though the king does not.

9. At the end of the scene, what does Claudius want to do with Hamlet? What is Polonius’ suggestion? Claudius wants to send Hamlet on a ship to England, but Polonius suggests that Claudius first allow Queen Gertrude to try to talk to Hamlet privately. He’s hopeful that Gertrude will be able to get to the center of Hamlet’s heart.

Act 3, Sc. 2
1. At the beginning of this scene, Shakespeare gives the audience a glimpse into his true feelings about actors and audiences through the words of Hamlet. Paraphrase Hamlet’s message about these two groups from his first paragraph of the scene. Then, explain what’s humorous about Shakespeare’s opinion of the groundlings in his audience, given the timeless popularity of this play. Shakespeare, through the words of Hamlet, says that he is deeply offended by bad actors who don’t do a good job delivering their lines. He’s also irritated by the groundlings because they only enjoy the dumb bits of a play. Hamlets says actors who are not good at their craft ought to be whipped. This is ironic because
audiences of all social classes continue to attend, study, and enjoy his play.

2. According to Hamlet, why is a compliment given to a poor person more valuable than one given to a nobleman? When people compliment someone with money and power, the compliment can never be counted as truly sincere, since the flatterer is probably just trying to gain an advantage. A compliment given to a poor person is earnest because the person giving the bit of flattery has nothing to gain in the exchange. Hamlet flatters Horatio because he truly respects his friend.

3. Of all of the characters in the play, which one does Hamlet trust the most? How do you know this? Write a line from the play that serves as evidence for your conclusion. It should be clear to the reader that Horatio is Hamlet’s closest ally. Hamlet says that his soul loves Horatio and knows him to be a true and faithful friend. This is the line that shows us this: “Since my dear soul was mistress of her choice and could of men distinguish, her election hath sealed thee for herself. For thou hast been as one, in suff’ring all, that suffers nothing...”

4. When Hamlet speaks to King Claudius, he equates himself with a chameleon in a string of babble that the king doesn’t understand. Why is a chameleon an interesting comparison for Hamlet to make? Because he, like a chameleon, will change his appearance to hide his true nature/gain an advantage.

5. Polonius tells us that, in college, he played the role of Julius Caesar, the emperor of Rome who was assassinated by men he thought were his friends. How might this be an element of foreshadowing in this play? Polonius is going to die, or at least that’s what students should suspect. Caesar also evokes the idea of not knowing whom to trust in a deceitful world.

6. Hamlet makes the murderer in the play the king’s nephew, not his brother. Give two reasons why Hamlet may have made this choice. First, he doesn’t want to be completely obvious. Second, the suggestion of a nephew who kills a king is a not-so-veiled threat to Claudius.

7. In The Murder of Gonzago, the queen character says that a second marriage would only ever be for this one reason. What’s the reason? The actor says the only reason one would marry a second time would be for financial gain/security.

8. In criticizing the performance of the queen in the play, Queen Gertrude says, “The lady doth protest too much, methinks.” What does this famous line mean? The line means that the person is lying. When a person swears his/her innocence excessively, it should make us pause and doubt the person’s true innocence.

9. While talking to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, Hamlet compares himself to a recorder. In what way is Hamlet like this musical instrument? Hamlet says that his former friends are trying to “play” him, to manipulate and handle him in just the right way to pump information out of him for King Claudius.

10. Toward the end of the scene, Hamlet mentions to Polonius that he sees the shape of a camel, a weasel, and a whale in the clouds. What’s Hamlet doing here? What does this brief bit show us about Polonius? Hamlet is continuing his strategy of seeming crazy, but also proving that Polonius is nothing more than a Yes Man, mindlessly agreeing to whatever Hamlet says. The audience should realize that Polonius is just trying to placate Hamlet.

11. In the soliloquy at the end of the scene, what power does Hamlet seek in his own heart? Hamlet asks his heart to allow him to be cruel to his mother, but to withhold his urge to kill her.

Act 3, Sc. 3

1. In King Claudius’ soliloquy, we learn that he feels guilty, but isn’t willing to give up the prizes he’s won from committing the murder of his brother. What’s your opinion of Claudius? Give reasoning for your answer. Students’ answers will vary, but they all usually hate him. In a class discussion of students’ answers, I like to play the Devil’s Advocate here and defend Claudius. He does feel guilty. Does that redeem him in any way? Hamlet seems to think so.

2. Hamlet sneaks up on Claudius while the king is in the midst of praying and decides this is not the time to kill his uncle. Why? When, according to Hamlet, would be a better time to kill the king? Hamlet doesn’t want to allow for any possibility that Claudius might be forgiven by God and allowed admittance into heaven. He says a better time would be when the king is in the midst of sinful behavior, such as passing out after drinking too much booze, making love to Gertrude, gambling, swearing, or raging.

3. What’s your opinion about Hamlet’s decision to not kill his uncle in this scene? Do you agree with his logic or do you think this is another example of Hamlet’s inability to move forward with his plan? Explain your answer. Again, students’ answers will vary and this question should lead to a lively debate.
Act 3, Sc. 4

1. Some critics suspect that Gertrude was wooed by Claudius before the death of King Hamlet and may have even played a part in his murder. Other scholars argue that this is not correct and that Gertrude was won by Claudius only after her husband’s death. On which side of this debate do you agree? Give evidence to explain your stance. Students’ answers will vary and make for a good debate. There are sections in which Gertrude talks about “trespass” /sins and the dark marks on her soul, but the phrasing does not make it clear if she’s referring to the murder, adultery, or just the ick-factor of hooking up with her brother-in-law. Shakespeare leaves the answer to this question ambiguous.

2. Where is Polonius when he is killed by Hamlet? What’s symbolically interesting about this? Polonius is hiding behind a tapestry /curtain when he’s stabbed by Hamlet. Symbolically, Shakespeare may have used this as a comment about all of the lies being spun by various characters, including Polonius and Hamlet. Many people in this play have cloaked their true natures and the symbolism in this scene emphasizes this idea.

3. What two things does Hamlet command his mother NOT to do? Do you think Gertrude will obey Hamlet’s commands? Why or why not? Hamlet tells her not to allow Claudius to coax from her the truth that Hamlet’s mental illness is fake. He also does not want his mother to have sex with Claudius anymore. It seems like Gertrude is sincere in her agreement to follow Hamlet’s orders, but this is also a woman who doesn’t have the strongest will. Students will likely disagree about their belief in Gertrude’s ability to stay true to her word.

4. Look closely at the last paragraph of the scene. What, do you suppose, is Hamlet’s plan in terms of traveling to England with Rosencrantz and Guildenstern? He refers to his two “friends” as fanged snakes and knows they are planning to hurt him on the voyage. However, he says he’ll be one step ahead of them and will use their snare against them. It’s clear that he does not believe the voyage to England will be a successful mission.

Act 4, Sc. 1

1. What is Claudius’ reaction when he’s told of Polonius’ death? What does this show us about his feelings toward Polonius, one of his closest allies? When Gertrude tells Claudius about Polonius’ death, Claudius thinks first of himself, grateful that he wasn’t the one hidden behind the curtain. This shows his selfishness and implies that he was not especially close to Polonius. Claudius is more upset that Hamlet is a threat to him than he is about the death of a man who was supposedly one of his closest friends.

2. When does King Claudius plan to launch Hamlet’s ship to England? Why the hurry? The ship will sail at sunset this evening. Claudius wants to get Hamlet out of town before people find out that the young man murdered Polonius.

3. In trying to protect Hamlet, Queen Gertrude tells Claudius that Hamlet “weeps for what is done.” There is a double-meaning in this line. Explain the two meanings. The first meaning is that Hamlet still has a core of goodness in that he’s crying about the murder of Polonius. A different way of reading the line, though, means that Hamlet is crying over “what is done,” namely the killing of King Hamlet and his mother’s decision to marry Claudius.

4. What unpleasant task does the King give to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern? They need to go find Polonius’ dead body and bring it to the chapel. Ew.

5. Why can’t Claudius just announce to everyone that Hamlet killed Polonius and have him put on trial? He’s worried that people will blame him for allowing Hamlet to roam unsupervised when he clearly was not mentally well. Claudius is worried that this will reflect poorly on himself. He also knows that most of the people of Denmark like Hamlet and he’s worried that public opinion will tilt in Hamlet’s favor.

Act 4, Sc. 2

1. What is Hamlet’s point in comparing Rosencrantz to a sponge? He says that Rosencrantz is soaked full of the King’s influence, but that he’ll be wrung out and used up /left dry by the king in the end. He’s also saying that the king is using Rosencrantz (and Guildenstern) to clean up his messes.

2. Hamlet says that “a knavish speech sleeps in a foolish ear.” Given that “knavish” means “dishonest,” who is the knave and who is the fool? Explain your answer. Students’ answers will vary, as the line is intentionally ambiguous and the case can be made in several ways regarding different characters. It’s fun, though, to see where students take this question. Some will say Hamlet is the knife and Rosencrantz is the fool. Others will say Rosencrantz is the knife and Hamlet the fool. Finally, it should be noted that this parallels the murder, with Claudius being the knave and King
Hamlet the fool for not recognizing the danger his brother presented.

3. Read Hamlet’s last line in the scene. Do you think he says this seriously and goes with the men to see the king? Or do you think he says this playfully and runs away, making the men chase him? Upon what do you base your answer? Again, students’ answers will vary. Different productions of the play present the end of this scene in different ways. It’s open for interpretation.

Act 4, Sc. 3
1. At the beginning of the scene, what’s ironic about Claudius’ criticism of the Danish people? He says that the people are swayed by their affection for Hamlet and he is annoyed that they would be more upset about a punishment of Hamlet than they would be about the murderous offense he committed. The irony, of course, is that Claudius is saying here that a man should be judged based on the crimes he committed. Claudius is a murderer himself, yet hasn’t been held accountable either and certainly wouldn’t want to be held to such a standard.

2. According to Hamlet, why does he think worms are the most powerful when it comes to the food chain? He says that people fatten up animals to slaughter and eat them. We get fat on such flesh, but when we die our fatty flesh is eaten by the worms. So, worms win!

3. When Claudius asks Hamlet about the location of Polonius’ body, Hamlet says that Polonius is in “heaven. Send hither to see. If your messenger find him not there, seek him i’ th’ other place yourself.” What is Hamlet really saying to Claudius here? Hamlet is telling his step-father to go to hell.

4. Why does Hamlet call Claudius “mother” instead of “father?” He’s messing with Claudius and making fun of him, calling him a woman and implying that he’s weak. Also, it would be much too bitter for Hamlet to call Claudius by the name of “father.”

5. Look at the last passage in this scene. Claudius has written a letter to the King of England. What is Claudius’ command? He orders the King of England, who should fear and respect Denmark because of the country’s triumph over England in previous battles, to kill Hamlet immediately.

Act 4, Sc. 4
1. What is Hamlet’s opinion of the battle about to be struck between Fortinbras and the Polish soldiers over an undesirable stretch of land? He says it’s ridiculous that the battle will cost so many lives and so much money, but that’s what happens when countries have too much wealth and nothing better to do. They fight over stupid things and hurt themselves/their own nations.

2. Examine Hamlet’s soliloquy and explain how Fortinbras unknowingly becomes Hamlet’s motivation to return to Denmark and take his revenge against Claudius. Hamlet looks at Fortinbras, who is willing to fight and die over nothing more valuable than honor, and he is a ashamed that he hasn’t already taken action against Claudius. If Fortinbras is willing to die over a stupid slice of useless soil, then Hamlet reasons he should be willing to die in pursuit of justice.

Act 4, Sc. 5
1. Describe Ophelia’s recent odd behavior. A gentleman reports that Ophelia has been talking about her murdered father a lot and says there are conspiracies in Denmark. She babbles, coughs, and beats her heart. Her words are meaningless, yet some people are trying to make sense out of her words because they seem to suggest something bad for the state of Denmark. People are worried about Ophelia, who seems to have lost her mind.

2. Queen Gertrude doesn’t want to see Ophelia, but relents. Why? Horatio suggests that people are listening to Ophelia’s babbling and those who don’t like the royal couple might use Ophelia’s words against the royals.

3. What are the two subjects of the songs Ophelia sings for Gertrude and Claudius? What does Claudius think has caused her mental illness? What do you think has also contributed to her pain? She sings about both a dead man and a heartbroken young woman who slept with a man in the hopes that he would marry her; sadly, he dumps her after they’ve had sex, saying that he would have married her if she had not had sex with him. Claudius thinks she’s upset because of Polonius’ death; we should see that she’s also upset by Hamlet’s harsh rejection and cruel mocking of her.

4. Explain how the reactions of Ophelia and Laertes to their father’s murder are used to mirror and amplify Hamlet’s reaction to King Hamlet’s murder. Both Ophelia and Laertes serve as foils here. Hamlet pretends to be mad, but
Ophelia is truly driven insane. Hamlet thinks about confronting Claudius and exacting his revenge, but Laertes actually moves quickly toward the same goal. In both cases, the echo of Hamlet’s deceit and inaction should be strong for the audience.

Act 4, Sc. 6
1. Explain what happened while Hamlet was at sea, sailing to England. Less than two days into the journey, his ship was attacked by pirates. During the battle, Hamlet ended up on the pirates’ ship. The pirates turned out to be honorable men and agreed to return Hamlet to Denmark in exchange for a favor. The Danish ship containing Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and the other sailors continued on to England.

2. A deus ex machina occurs when a writer uses an unexpected or unlikely event to resolve a situation in his story. Explain how the interference of the pirate ship is a deus ex machina. Does this add to the drama of the story for you or take away from the impact? By contrasting the behavior of the pirates with the behavior of the royal family of Denmark, what interesting statement does Shakespeare seem to be making? Students’ answers will vary, but they always want to talk about those pirates. Students should recognize that the pirates behave surprisingly honorably, while the royal family is wretched. Wealth, privilege, and nobility are clearly not connected to moral superiority.

Act 4, Sc. 7
1. Laertes accepts Claudius’ statement that Hamlet is their mutual enemy, but Laertes wonders why Claudius didn’t take action against Hamlet sooner. What are the two reasons that Claudius gives to explain his inaction in punishing Hamlet? First, he says that Queen Gertrude is still very fond of her son and the king wanted to keep his queen happy. Second, he says that the people of Denmark love Hamlet and are willing to overlook his faults/crimes.

2. Laertes is well-known for having skill in a particular sport. What is it? How will this factor into Claudius’ plan to have Hamlet killed and make it look like an accident? Laertes is known to be an excellent fencer. Hamlet knows this and is a bit jealous of Laertes’ reputation, Claudius says. He’ll propose a duel between Hamlet and Laertes, but Laertes will use a sword with a poisoned tip. The poison is so strong that it will take only a nick to quickly kill Hamlet.

3. Just in case the first plan doesn’t work, what is Claudius’ back-up plan to ensure that Hamlet dies at the duel? When Hamlet, hot and sweaty from the fight, wants to take a drink, Claudius will have a goblet of a poisoned beverage delivered to the prince.

4. What’s interesting about Claudius’ preferred method of killing people? What does this show us about the man? Just as he poisoned King Hamlet, he’s planning on using poison to end the life of Hamlet. This is a cowardly way of killing someone and the audience should realize that Claudius is less of a man than a king should be in many, many ways.

5. Describe the scene of Ophelia’s drowning. Do you think her death was an accident or a suicide? Explain your reasoning. Ophelia was walking near a creek with lots of flowers that she had woven into wreaths. She went to hang the flower wreaths on a tree when she fell into the creek. Her heavy dress soaked up the water and eventually pulled her underwater, though Ophelia didn’t kick or scream or fight to get out of the water. Students’ answers to the last question will vary and make for a nice in-class debate.

6. What lie does Claudius tell Gertrude at the end of this scene? What idea does this reinforce? As they’re leaving, Claudius tells Gertrude that he’s been trying to calm Laertes, but we know just the opposite is true. This closing remark emphasizes for the audience that Claudius is a lying snake.

Act 5, Sc. 1
1. At the beginning of the scene, two “clowns,” or gravediggers, are talking about Ophelia’s death. Why is one of the gravediggers irritated that Ophelia will be given a Christian burial in the graveyard? He strongly suspects that Ophelia committed suicide and thinks it’s wrong that someone who has committed such a heavy sin be allowed proper burial in the church’s graveyard. He’s irritated that the rules don’t seem to apply to wealthy people or those of the noble class.

2. In your own words, retell one of the jokes or one of the puns told by the gravediggers. Students’ answers will vary, but they might discuss the word-play of the literal meaning of “arms” with coat of arms/noble rank. They might also retell one of the jokes about the hangman’s gallows or the gravedigger’s graves outlasting the creations of all other tradesmen.
3. Why would Shakespeare open the final act of this tragedy with the comic banter between the gravediggers and Hamlet? The theme of the banter connects to the thoughts Hamlet’s been having about the inconsequence of death, but this part of the scene also gives the audience a bit of a breather before the heavy emotions of the end of the play. There’s a ton of drama and tragedy to unfold in this act; the lightness of the beginning of the act helps emphasize the darkness of the end of the act. Finally, the callousness of the gravediggers helps to emphasize Shakespeare’s point that the problems of the royal family are not the problems of the everyday people of Denmark.

4. In criticizing the elite class, Hamlet says, “The hand of little employment hath the daintier sense.” What does he mean? Working-class people are forced, by the nature of their work, to steel themselves against the unpleasant realities of life. Wealthy people don’t have to face the ugly parts of daily life, so they have the luxury of being sentimental or squeamish about unpleasant things.

5. Find Shakespeare’s joke about his fellow Englishmen. Paraphrase the passage that likely would’ve made his Elizabethan audience chuckle. One of the gravediggers tells Hamlet, not realizing that he’s talking to the actual prince of Denmark, that Hamlet’s gone crazy and has been send to England. The royals hope that Hamlet will recover his wits in England, but if he doesn’t it’s okay because everyone in England is crazy and no one will notice anything different about Hamlet. Ha, ha, ha!

6. According to the text, how old is Hamlet? Does this sound right to you? Based on what you know about Hamlet and his family, how old do you think he is? Explain your reasoning. If we trust the gravedigger’s memory, then Hamlet is about 30 years old. Students’ answers will vary on the last questions, but we do know that King Hamlet and Gertrude were married for about 30 years and we know that Yorick, the court’s beloved jester, died 23 years ago (again, this is based on the gravedigger’s unreliable statement), but that Hamlet remembers him very well, meaning that Hamlet would have been seven years old at the man’s passing. This seems reasonable. Still, the gravedigger could be mistaken. Hamlet, who was away at school at few months ago when his father was killed, seems younger. He might, though, just be very immature for his age, a product of a pampered upbringing. In fact, many of the adults in this play (Polonius, Gertrude, Claudius) don’t act their age. And if Hamlet really is 30 (instead of, say, 20) then why didn’t he assume the crown instead of Claudius? Students should be encouraged to debate this point.

7. Who was Yorick? To Hamlet, how is this man just the same as Alexander the Great? Yorick was the royal family’s former court jester when Hamlet was a child. This lovable, silly man is now dust, just the same as the greatest rulers of all time.

8. What lines show that Polonius was wrong about his advice to Ophelia that Hamlet was out of her league/social class? When Gertrude throws flowers on Ophelia’s grave, she says, “I hoped thou shouldst have been my Hamlet’s wife.” Way back in Act 2, Scene 2 Polonius says that he’s never wrong and that he should be killed if he’s wrong. Well, it seems that’s just what happened.

9. What is the priest’s attitude about giving Christian burial rites to Ophelia? What is Laertes’ response to the priest? The priest thinks it’s outrageous and wrong to bury a sinner like Ophelia who killed herself, but he’s doing it at the king’s commandment. He wants to keep the ceremony short. Laertes is offended by the priest’s attitude and says Ophelia’s an angel singing in heaven, while the priest will likely burn in hell.

10. Hamlet is irritated by Laertes’ heavy show of grief and says that he loved Ophelia more than 40,000 brothers could have loved her. List four of the things Hamlet says he’s willing to do to prove that his love for Ophelia was stronger than Laertes’ love. He says that he would cry, fight, starve himself, cut himself, drink vinegar, and eat a crocodile.

11. Thinking back over what you know about Hamlet and Ophelia’s relationship, do you think Hamlet really loved Ophelia? Defend your answer. Students’ answers will vary. The class conversation about this question is usually quite compelling.

Act 5, Sc. 2

1. Hamlet explains the contents of the letter he wrote to the King of England using Claudius’ name. Later, we find out that Hamlet’s orders were followed and that Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead. Did these two men deserve to die? Explain your thoughts. Students’ answers will vary, but it does seem that their greatest sin was obeying their king. Although Hamlet would disagree, it does seem that this punishment does not fit their crime.

2. Why does Hamlet toy with Osric, making him agree that the weather is hot then cold and then hot again? This passage echoes a scene between Hamlet and which other character from earlier in the play? What is Hamlet’s point
Hamlet doesn’t like Osric and thinks he’s a shallow sycophant, looking to weasel his way into the king’s good graces. This passage should remind the audience of Polonius’ earlier agreement with Hamlet about the shape-shifting clouds. Both of these men are Yes Men and should not be trusted, Hamlet proves to himself and to the audience.

3. Horatio urges Hamlet not to duel Laertes, but Hamlet proceeds despite his misgivings. How does his willingness to fight Laertes prove to us that Hamlet is changed and finally ready to fulfill his destiny as a tragic hero? In moving forward with the duel, Hamlet shows that he’s finally ready to take action. He doesn’t hesitate or invent reasons to wait. Finally, he’s ready to face whatever may come, including death, and this is a heroic stance.

4. At what point does Gertrude realize Claudius’ treachery? She realizes he’s the villain in her very last breath. She warns Hamlet that the drink meant for him has been poisoned.

5. What is Laertes’ dying request of Hamlet? Laertes asks to be forgiven for the role he played in ending Hamlet’s life. Laertes realizes at the end that he had been manipulated by Claudius, the real villain.

6. What is the means of Claudius’ death? Did you find his death satisfying? Why or why not? He is stabbed by Hamlet with the poison-tipped sword and then made to swallow the remainder of the poisoned drink in the goblet. This is ironic, of course, because Claudius is killed with his own poison. Earlier, Laertes says that he is “as a woodcock to mine own springe” and, in just the same way, Claudius is caught in his own trap. Students’ answers will vary on the last two questions.

7. What is Hamlet’s dying request of Horatio? Hamlet asks that his friend be the one to tell the world Hamlet’s tragic tale.

8. As he dies, Hamlet says that young Fortinbras has his vote to be the next ruler of Denmark. Why, do you suppose, Hamlet holds so much respect for Fortinbras? Both of these men were royal sons of deceased fathers, but Fortinbras is much more of a confident leader who quickly accomplishes his goals. Hamlet realizes that Denmark will be well-led by a man who takes decisive action, something he wasn’t able to do until his own impending death was upon him.

9. Including King Hamlet, how many characters die in this play? What message can the audience take away from this tragedy? There are nine deaths in this play: King Hamlet; Polonius; Ophelia; Rosencrantz; Guildenstern; Queen Gertrude; King Claudius; Laertes; and Hamlet. Students’ answers will vary, but it’s clear that sin and secrets will spread like a poison. Any discussion of theme must include mention of the inevitability of death, the uncertainty in life, and/or the power fear holds to prevent us from taking action on difficult, but necessary things.