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Rewriting the Prologue from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*

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As part of my introduction of William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* to my freshman English class, I share with my students an overhead transparency on which I have printed the play's prologue. In advance, I have underlined assorted words and phrases in the well-known fourteen-line passage. My students' challenge is to replace the underlined words in the lines to create a new prologue—not for *Romeo and Juliet* but for their own fiction or nonfiction story. It is my hope that, through this activity, they will connect their world to our study—and, in turn, bridge their world to Shakespeare's.

While creating this new piece, the students are directed to maintain the iambic pentameter. Because the iambic pentameter becomes a focus, I don't require the students to work with the rhyme—but that may be an idea I will want to incorporate into the assignment in the future. By the end of the activity, the students have experimented with lengthening words, abbreviating, using apostrophes, and exploring dictionaries and thesauruses for alternative words—all to find words with just that right number of syllables to create the iambic pentameter in their own prologue.

It is with great satisfaction that, following this writing experience, I have heard several students comment on and marvel at Shakespeare's skill as a writer. Interestingly, the value they have expressed runs deeper than mere appreciation: Now they, too, are writers, qualified to evaluate and emulate.

Original Prologue from *Romeo and Juliet*

*Two households, both alike in dignity,
In fair Verona, where we lay our scene,
From ancient grudge break to new mutiny,
Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean.
From forth the fatal loins of these two foes
A pair of star-cross'd lovers take their life;
Whose misadventur'd piteous overthrows
Do with their death bury their parents' strife.
The fearful passage of their death-mark'd love,
And the continuance of their parents' rage,
Which, but their children's end, nought could remove,
Is now the two hours' traffick of our stage;
The which if you with patient ears attend,
What here shall miss, our toil shall strive to mend.*

—from *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare*, edited by W. J. Craig, Oxford University Press, London, 1924.

Student Version 1

*Two schools, both alike in many ways,
In fair Bay City, where we lay our tale,
From rival grudge break to new extreme heights,
Where old grudges make new ones to begin.
From forth the enemies of these two schools,
A pair of football players take their time;
Whose kickoff stunk piteous and stunk again
Do with their game what their coaches like.
The brand new passage of their brand new tricks,
And the continuance of their linebacker,
Which, but their brand new shoes naught could help kick,
Is now the two very fun-filled hours of our stage;
The which if you decide to attend,
What here shall miss, we never shall strive to mend.*
—Tara, student, Bay City Public Schools

Student Version 2

*Two dirt bikes both alike in displacement,
In fair Pontiac where we lay our race
From starting point break to new finish'ed
Where fast racers make great entertainment
From forth the fast meters of these two bikes
A pair of pro-blood racers take their stage
Whose factory rides piteous triple jumps
Do with their great skill their parents proud.
The tires passage of their excel rims,
And the continuance of their cycles revs,
Which, but their hard crashes, naught could stop them,
Is now the two hours moving of our stage;
The which if you with watchful eyes attend,
What here shall see, our race shall strive to mend.*
—Brad, student, Bay City Public Schools

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