Shakespeare Biography
A Comprehensive Shakespeare Biography

Amazingly, we know very little about Shakespeare’s life. Even though he is the world’s most famous and popular playwright, historians have had to fill in the gaps between the handful of surviving records from Elizabethan times.

Shakespeare Biography: The Basics
Born: April 23, 1564
Died: April 23, 1616
Married Anne Hathaway in November 1582
Born and raised in Stratford-upon-Avon, England, but moved to London in the late 1580s. Shakespeare’s 37 plays and 154 sonnets are considered the most important and enduring ever written. Although the plays have captured the imagination of theatergoers for centuries, some historians claim that Shakespeare didn’t actually write them.

Shakespeare’s Early Years:
Shakespeare was probably born on April 23, 1564, but this date is an educated guess because we only have a record of his baptism three days later. His parents, John Shakespeare and Mary Arden, were successful townsfolk who moved to a large house in Henley Street, Stratford-upon-Avon from the surrounding villages. His father became a wealthy town official and his mother was from an important, respected family.

It is widely assumed that he attended the local grammar school where he would have studied Latin, Greek and classical literature. His early education must have made a huge impact on him because many of his plots draw on the classics.

Shakespeare’s Family:
At 18, Shakespeare married Anne Hathaway from Shottery who was already
pregnant with their first daughter. The wedding would have been arranged quickly to avoid the shame of having a child born out of wedlock. Shakespeare fathered three children in all: Susanna; born in May 1583, and Judith and Hamnet; twins born in February 1585. Hamnet died in 1596, at age 11. Shakespeare was devastated by the death of his only son, and it is argued that Hamlet, written four years later, is evidence of this.

**Shakespeare’s Theater Career:**

At some point in the late 1580s, Shakespeare made the four-day ride to London, and by 1592 had established himself as a writer.

In 1594 came the event that changed the course of literary history – Shakespeare joined Richard Burbage’s acting company and became its chief playwright for the next two decades. Here, Shakespeare was able to hone his craft, writing for a regular group of performers. Shakespeare also worked as an actor in the theater company, although the lead roles were always reserved for Burbage himself.

The company became very successful and often performed in front of the Queen of England, Elizabeth I. In 1603, James I ascended the throne and granted his royal patronage to Shakespeare’s company, which became known as The King’s Men.

**Top 10 Most Important Plays (in chronological order):**

- *Romeo and Juliet* (1594-1595)
- *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1595-1596)
- *Much Ado About Nothing* (1598-1599)
- *Henry V* (1598-1599)
- *Twelfth Night* (1599-1600)
- *Hamlet* (1600-1601)
- *Measure for Measure* (1604-1605)
- *King Lear* (1605-1606)
- *Macbeth* (1605-1606)
- *The Tempest* (1611-1612)

**Shakespeare the Gentleman:**

Like his father, Shakespeare had excellent business sense. He had bought the largest house in Stratford-upon-Avon by 1597, he owned shares in the Globe Theater, and profited from some real estate deals near Stratford-upon-Avon in 1605. Before long, Shakespeare officially became a gentleman, partly due to his own wealth and partly due to inheriting a coat of arms from his father who died in 1601.

**Shakespeare’s Later Years:**

Shakespeare retired to Stratford in 1611 and lived comfortably off his wealth for the rest of his life. In his will, he bequeathed most of his properties to Susanna, his eldest daughter, and some actors from The King’s Men. Famously, he left his wife his “second best bed” before he died on April 23, 1616 (this date is an educated guess because we only have a record of his burial two days later).

If you visit Holy Trinity Church in Stratford-upon-Avon, you can still view his grave and read his epitaph engraved into the stone:

> Good friend, for Jesus’ sake forbear  
> To dig the dust enclosed here.  
> Blessed be the man that spares these stones,  
> And cursed be he that moves my bones.
1. Choose four terms in which you are uncertain of the definition. Look up the definition of each term. List the terms and definition below.

2. Why are Shakespeare’s birth and death listed as educated guesses?
3. When a teacher or adult mentions “Shakespeare” to you, what comes to mind? Be honest. Why do you think this way? Are you being realistic? Do you think you would like Shakespeare if you had the opportunity to see a play?

4. List five interesting facts you learned about William Shakespeare.