

MasterClass



Helen Mirren



Teaches Acting



“Our world of acting is an empty space.
It’s an empty space that we fill with our
imagination, with our technique, with our
philosophy, with our poetry, with our
passion, with our fears, with our insecurity.
This empty space becomes the platform for
storytelling because that’s what we do.

We tell stories.”

—Helen Mirren



ABOUT **HELEN MIRREN**

Helen Mirren is one of the greatest actresses of our time—not to mention an Academy Award winner, Emmy Award winner, Tony Award winner, and Golden Globe winner. Though she did not attend drama school, Helen underwent intensive training at the prestigious Royal Shakespeare Company in London, and also spent a year traveling the world in Peter Brook’s experimental theater company. She is known for her work both on stage and on film.

Helen earned mainstream acclaim for her role as detective Jane Tennison over seven seasons on the BBC show *Prime Suspect*. She is well known for her portrayals of historical characters, most notably Queen Elizabeth I and Queen Elizabeth II.



INTRODUCTION

ABOUT THIS WORKBOOK

The MasterClass team has created this workbook as a supplement to Helen's class. Each chapter is supported here with a review, opportunities to learn more, and assignments.

SUPPLIES AND MATERIALS

To be an active participant in Helen's MasterClass, you'll need a camera to record yourself. Throughout, we'll encourage you to upload your recordings to [The Hub](#) to get constructive feedback from your classmates.

Writing is an important part of Helen's process. We recommend that you dedicate a notebook to the exercises in this class.

MASTERCLASS COMMUNITY

Throughout, we'll encourage you to share work and discuss class materials with your classmates in [The Hub](#). You can also connect with your peers in the discussion section beneath each lesson video.

REQUIRED READING

Throughout her class, Helen discusses two books that were very influential to her. We recommend you begin reading them now, so that you may reference them as you progress through the class.

- Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*, Simon & Schuster, 1968.
- David Sylvester, *Interviews with Francis Bacon*, Thames & Hudson, 1975.

YOUR COURSE WORK

The exercises in this workbook are designed to help you create your own unique acting process. The class will help you to develop a deeper understanding of character intentions, to imagine backstories, to research roles, to collaborate with writers and directors, to break down a script, and to create characters through costume, hair, and makeup.

Finding and learning two Shakespeare monologues of your choice will be part of the exploration we do here. Helen says that “if you can do Shakespeare, you can do anything.” The skills you develop by workshopping Shakespeare monologues will serve you throughout your acting career.

This work will serve as a jumping off point for you to begin creating your own process, and give you a strong foundation for understanding any material that you may encounter on your journey.

SUGGESTED RESOURCES

We recommend additional reading throughout the course to supplement your learning. You may want to have these books on hand as references throughout the class.

- *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* (available for free [online from MIT](#))
- *Arden Shakespeare Complete Works*, Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1998.*
- Alexander Schmidt, *Shakespeare Lexicon and Quotation Dictionary Vol. 1 & 2*, Dover, 1971.
- Online subscription to the [Oxford English Dictionary](#).
- Cicely Berry, *Voice and the Actor*, Wiley, 1991.
- Michael Shurtleff, *Audition*, Bantam, 1980.
- Karen Kohlhaas, *The Monologue Audition: A Practical Guide For Actors*, Limelight Editions, 2000.
- Michael Caine, *Acting In Film: An Actor's Take on Movie Making*, Applause, 1997.

*Use the Arden or the Folger Shakespeare Library editions once you select your individual plays to work on. Folger does not have a complete works, but their plays are just as comprehensive.

2.

HELEN'S JOURNEY IN THE THEATER

“My two great inspirations as an actor were a variety show and one of the greatest plays by the greatest playwright ever. But I think that that really indicates the breadth of what is available for us to do and the fact that we shouldn't be snobby about any of it—because it's all play. [It] feeds into that same 'filling up the empty space.'”

—Helen Mirren

SUBCHAPTERS

- Showgirls and Shakespeare
- Early Training and Opportunities
- Learning to Swim at The Royal Shakespeare Company

CHAPTER REVIEW

Helen grew up in a world where drama was not as accessible as it is today, and with a family that was not financially able to expose her to theater and film. She recounts her two earliest experiences in the theater: one was an amateur production of *Hamlet*, where she was captivated by the language, characters, and sense of imagination; the other, a variety show at the end of a pier in her hometown, where she fell in love with costume and the dark space in which the audience was transformed by what was happening on stage. Helen uses these dual inspirations to remind us of the great range available to us as actors. Acting at its core is really all play, and our job is to transport an audience by telling stories.

Helen did not go to drama school; rather, she found her own way into the world of acting. With the encouragement of one of her English teachers, she auditioned for the National Youth Theatre and was accepted. There, her performance as Cleopatra earned her recognition from national critics and led to an invitation to join the prestigious Royal Shakespeare Company. She did not go to the RSC immediately, though, as her parents insisted that she complete her degree at a teaching college first. Once she graduated, Helen joined the RSC and found herself thrown into the deep end, having to learn on the job and by watching some of the great actors of her time.

LEARN MORE

- Think about the first play or film (or any kind of performance) you saw that moved you. Tap into your visual memory and describe it in your notebook, considering the following questions:
 - What performance was it?
 - How old were you and who exposed you to it?
 - What about it was so captivating for you?
 - What images from it are most clear in your mind?
 - Why do you think they made an impression on you?

2.

HELEN'S JOURNEY IN THE THEATER

ASSIGNMENT

- Start to familiarize yourself with Shakespeare's work. You can find a collection of the complete works of William Shakespeare at your local library or [online via MIT](#). As you read, notice the language that pops out at you. Do you connect more with the dramas or comedies? Note what attracts you to certain stories, characters, and the poetry itself.

If you're completely unfamiliar, here are some good plays to start with:

- *A Midsummer Night's Dream*
- *As You Like It*
- *Hamlet*
- *King Lear*
- *Othello*
- *Macbeth*
- *Romeo and Juliet*
- *The Taming of the Shrew*
- *Twelfth Night*
- *The Tempest*
- *The Merchant of Venice*
- *Henry V*

3.

EVOLVING AS A THEATER ACTRESS

*“Freedom is my holy chalice
that I’ve been chasing after
my whole life.”*

—Helen Mirren

SUBCHAPTERS

- Train Your Voice
- Finding Freedom With Peter Brook
- Taking Control
- Own Your Physicality

CHAPTER REVIEW

As a young actress at the RSC, Helen was fortunate enough to train with the Company’s voice teachers. She emphasizes the importance of freeing your voice, and encourages you to do the physical work of training your voice.

When Helen saw Peter Brook’s experimental theater productions in London, she realized it was time to push her boundaries beyond the classical work she was doing at the RSC. Despite objections from her family and agent, Helen listened to her instincts and joined his company, performing with them around the world for a year.

Among the many lessons Helen learned from her time with Brook, the most important was self-acceptance. Helen passes this lesson onto us, instructing us to embrace our individuality and our physical bodies. Own who you are—don’t fight against it—and don’t compare yourself to others.

When Helen returned to classical theater after her year with Brook, she felt empowered and in control of what she was doing on stage. She found that she had both the vocal and intellectual ability to perform Shakespeare, and that she could now find freedom within that ability. This feeling of control drove her to expand her knowledge of acting into film and television.

LEARN MORE

- One of the most important skills Helen developed at the RSC was a command of her voice. Doing voice work is necessary as an actor, especially if you hope to have a stage career. Your body is your instrument, and it’s important to know how to fine-tune and play it. Form your own group and get together a few times a week for 30 minutes. Find vocal training material to use, and do the exercises together. You might consider referencing the work of renowned voice teacher Cicely Berry, to which Helen refers in her Office Hours.
- Spend some time reading Peter Brook’s *The Empty Space*. How does his perspective on theater challenge your notions of and experience of acting?

3.

EVOLVING AS A THEATER ACTRESS

LEARN MORE CONT.

- As you begin thinking about workshopping Shakespeare monologues over the coming chapters, [watch](#) Peter Brook's speech "The Esoteric and the Profane in Shakespeare," delivered at the British Library in 2016. He asserts that we don't know Shakespeare's point of view about his characters; rather, it's the director that ends up putting a spin on them.

ASSIGNMENT

- Narrow your choice of characters you'd like to work on to two or three, and reflect on what you've learned from Peter Brook. Write down the assumptions you have about each character based on your preexisting knowledge or first reading of the monologue or play. Then, try to think of them simply as human beings, without judgment or preconceived notions. Write about what comes up when you take away your judgments. Remember that even if you choose a villain—for example, Iago in *Othello*—that character doesn't know he is a villain. Perhaps this will change your mind as to who you'd like to play!

CHOOSING ROLES

“We just want to be given the chance to try to do it, to do this wonderful Caliban thing of reaching out for the unknown.”

—Helen Mirren

SUBCHAPTERS

- Show Respect and Thoughtfulness in Auditions
- Look for Your Character’s Exit
- Do Something Different From Your Last Role
- Take Stereotypical Roles and Get Creative
- Discuss Nudity Before Taking a Role
- Transcending Traditional Casting Choices

CHAPTER REVIEW

Helen offers us two major pieces of advice regarding auditions. The first is on taking direction: when you get a note, try your best to incorporate that note. Give it a shot, even if you don’t think it’s right. This will let the director know that you can, in fact, be directed, and that you’re not stuck in one way of doing things. It will also show them that you can listen and take direction gracefully. The second is to show intelligence and preparedness. When you’re in the room, ask one or two intelligent questions, showing them that you thought about the piece and the character.

When Helen is considering a role, the most important criteria is not how many lines the character has, but rather how much of an impact they make on the story. She always looks to see if they are on the last page of the script—if they are, it normally means they are a meaningful character. If they’re not on the last page, she looks at how they exit the story. Does their exit impact the story in a significant way? Given where she is in her career, Helen has the option to choose which roles she will take. Even if this isn’t the case for you at the moment, you can learn from her technique when it comes to evaluating your character’s place in the script.

As you’re trying to build your resume in the early stages of your career, it may be necessary to take any roles you can get, even if they’re stereotypical. When you do find yourself in smaller, less interesting roles, develop a backstory for yourself to give it some depth. No need to share your backstory with anyone; it’s simply a tool for you to feel grounded in the role.

Once you’re in a place with more options, try to diversify your acting repertoire. Avoid what the industry expects you to do by seeking or accepting roles opposite recent ones.

The decision to take a role that involves nudity is a personal one. Think about what feels right for you, but don’t show up on set on the day of and decide you’re not going to do it, as that would be unprofessional. Finally, don’t be afraid to push back on traditional casting limitations like gender or race. If an opportunity to audition for a role that’s a different gender or race than you arises, take it.

4.

CHOOSING ROLES

LEARN MORE

- Whether you're new to auditioning or experienced, it's helpful to read about the process and how to prepare. Michael Shurtleff's book *Audition* is a classic that acting teachers have recommended for years. Karen Kohlhaas from the Atlantic Acting School in New York also has a wonderful book specifically dedicated to the monologue audition, *The Monologue Audition: A Practical Guide For Actors*. Read both of them if you can, and write down key points that stand out to you in your notebook.

ASSIGNMENTS

- It's time to choose a Shakespeare character and monologue you want to prepare—one you will be able to use at auditions. While many Shakespeare characters have good monologues, not all do—so choose your character with that in mind. Also, consider challenging yourself to think outside of conventional casting limitations like gender. You can reference Shakespeare monologues for men and women [here](#).
- Once you've chosen the character, borrow or buy an edition of the play with good footnotes to help you translate, like the Arden or the Folger. Read the play in full if you haven't already. Who is your character, and why have you chosen them? Which of their monologues appeals to you, and why?
- Connect with your classmates in [The Hub](#), and find other students who have chosen the same character. Or, if no one else has chosen the same character, find others who chose the same play. Form a workgroup, so that you can use each other for reference as you complete your coursework.
- Find your monologue in the edition you've purchased and retype it for yourself. This will be important later for when you go further into the actual text work, you'll want the most correct version. Do not work from the monologue text you find online—it should only be for reference while you are in the process of choosing a character.

5.

BREAKING DOWN A SCRIPT

“I love that first readthrough. I love discovering the dialogue in my own mouth.”

—Helen Mirren

SUBCHAPTERS

- Note Your First Instinctive Reactions
- Allow Your Subconscious to Work
- When to Use Improv and When Not To
- Discover the Dialogue in Your Own Mouth
- Deconstruct the Script

CHAPTER REVIEW

Helen loves the discovery process that happens as she begins to work with a new script. She takes note of her first instinctive reactions to a character—even if it’s a simple wardrobe idea. Writing is an important part of Helen’s process as an actor, because it’s how she allows her subconscious ideas to take shape.

Improvisation can be a fantastic tool to uncover a deeper level of meaning within dense language or gain insight into a character. However, you must learn to recognize writers whose work is not meant to be improvised, because their material is so masterful and specific. The first table read with other actors is an opportunity to discover a character out loud. For Helen, this is a moment when the role can come at her “from left field,” and take her by surprise.

Breaking down a script is a very personal process that will vary depending on the amount of material you are preparing at once. When working on *Prime Suspect*, Helen posted her script all around her hotel room, which allowed her to stay in the world and know where she was in the story amid a massive amount of words.

LEARN MORE

- Seek out or create an opportunity to experience the discovery process that happens during a table read with other actors. Research whether there are auditions for “staged readings” where you live and if there are, audition for one. Or stage your own! Pick your favorite screenplay or play and get a group together to read through it together. If you don’t know any other actors in your area, use a video conferencing software to stage a virtual table read for a scene from your Shakespeare character’s play with classmates from your workgroup in [The Hub](#).

5.

BREAKING DOWN A SCRIPT

LEARN MORE CONT.

- Improvisation can also be a great tool for discovering more about your character and their relationships. Invite an acting partner to improvise with you a scene featuring your Shakespeare character that doesn't actually occur in the play. For example, you might improvise what happens after an existing scene ends, or before it begins. Act as mundane, silly, or dramatic as you want. For simplicity's sake, pick a scene with only your character and one other character. Set a timer and try to work for 3-5 minutes in this way. If you're improvising a scene that precedes a scene in the play, try to improvise it up to the point where that scene actually begins; or, if you're improvising after a scene ends, see where it takes you! Be sure to record character insights in your notebook.

ASSIGNMENTS

- Read your Shakespeare character's full play. In your notebook, go through and jot down any thoughts that come to you in the moment about your character as you are reading it for the first time. Helen believes that her first instincts are usually the best, so do your best to capture your first instinctive reactions. Keep these notes in mind as you continue to hone the monologue.
 - Dog-ear each scene your character appears in, and then return to each, writing the subtext in the margins. Subtext can just be one sentence, or it can be a whole paragraph, but it should be specific to every individual line in the scene as opposed to an overarching idea.
- Once you've finished breaking down the play, suss out the overarching personal story that your character is telling you. You don't have to share this story, but it should drive you as you continue to work.

6.

SHAKESPEARE, PART 1

“Shakespeare is a great training ground because it’s so difficult. It’s much harder than anything else you’ll ever do.”

—Helen Mirren

SUBCHAPTERS

- Let Shakespeare Take You by the Throat
- Make the Lines Live for You

*For word definitions, the [Oxford English Dictionary](#) is incredibly helpful here, which you can subscribe to online or find at most libraries. Avoid using Webster’s or any other online dictionary, as they tend not to be aligned with Shakespeare’s intended use of the word. Also, you may consider purchasing a Shakespeare lexicon; the Alexander Schmidt version is excellent.

CHAPTER REVIEW

Shakespeare presents actors with a profound challenge: to understand and deliver complex poetic lines in a natural way. Helen learned by watching some of the great actors at the RSC, and she was amazed by the way they would fully inhabit the language and find nuances in the lines every night. She learned that you have to *think* in Shakespeare in order to make the lines live for you. Developing that deep understanding of the lines through preparation and rehearsal allows you to live in the moment—a miraculous feeling when performing Shakespeare.

To share her process of breaking down a Shakespeare passage, Helen works through Portia’s “Quality of Mercy” speech from *The Merchant of Venice*, act 4, scene 1, a monologue she’s never performed before. Pay attention to how she makes connections and meaning as she translates the poetry into her own vernacular. Note how Shakespeare’s use of poetic devices such as alliteration (multiple “s” sounds in a sentence) and repeated images (“enthroned” and “sceptre”) set the scene for you and offer clues that later reveal the intention and nature of your character.

LEARN MORE

- Practice breaking down Portia’s speech for yourself. Print a copy of the “Quality of Mercy” speech for you to mark up.
 - Read through it aloud—just reading it, not acting it.
 - Go back through and put the speech into your own words. (Your words should be different than Helen’s interpretation, so that it’s really personal to you!) Write down your interpretation of each line in the margin next to it.* Finally, try saying it two ways: once in your own words, and then using the actual language. Do you notice a difference?
 - Record your readings and upload to [The Hub](#) to discuss what you found with your classmates. What was difficult for you? What came naturally?

6.

SHAKESPEARE, PART 1

ASSIGNMENTS

- Break down your chosen monologue using the process you just used for Portia's speech.
- Break down your monologue again, this time focusing on the punctuation, as it will tell you where to breathe in the piece. (This is especially helpful in stage acting, where substantial breath support is critical; but it's also helpful for film.) A general rule is that breaths are taken at the end of a sentence, though in cases of longer sentences, commas can help. Understanding how punctuation informs your breath will help you not only with pacing, but will offer you a deeper understanding of your lines.

7.

SHAKESPEARE, PART 2

“Allow your poetic imagination to be captured. Allow yourself these feelings of hope and reach, like Caliban.... We are actually all Caliban in the sense that we are creatures of this earth, sort of struggling in this earthly way.”
—Helen Mirren

SUBCHAPTERS

- We Are All Caliban
- Never Sing Shakespeare
- Performing Shakespeare on Stage and on Camera
- Develop a Personal Relationship With the Language

*Some of Shakespeare's characters only speak in prose, and some of them move between prose and verse within the play. Two examples of this are Rosalind in *As You Like It* and Hamlet in the play *Hamlet*. It's key to determine early whether your monologue is written in verse or in prose.

CHAPTER REVIEW

Helen emphasizes the importance of speaking Shakespeare with directness and intention; one should never “sing” Shakespeare, and make sure to fully vocalize each word. When performing Shakespeare on film, one has the opportunity to develop a more nuanced vocalization without the demand of reaching the person in the last row of the theater, which Helen experienced when playing Prospera in Julie Taymor's film adaptation of *The Tempest*. She breaks down her favorite speech—known as “Our Revels”—giving us insight into her deeply personal relationship with the lines.

LEARN MORE

- Watch Julie Taymor's film *The Tempest*. Purchase a copy of *The Tempest* and follow along, paying close attention to how Helen plays Prospera. Can you see how she personalizes the language so that it lives for her? Note moments when she creates with enunciation images so specific you can actually see them.

ASSIGNMENTS

- Focus on the images in your monologue. Helen talks about the beautiful phrases “cloud kept towers” and “solemn temples” used in Prospero's speech. Where do you find strong images like these in your monologue? Highlight these, and then personalize each in your notebook. Draw them, even, if it helps you.
- Most of Shakespeare's plays are written in iambic pentameter, a poetic meter in which each line is ten syllables, made up of five iambs—two-syllable chunks in which the first syllable is unstressed and the second is stressed. You may come across prose in Shakespeare as well, though it's less common.*

7.

SHAKESPEARE, PART 2

ASSIGNMENTS CONT.

- Now is a good time to familiarize yourself with scansion, or the practice of scanning a line of verse to determine its rhythm. Meter is essentially the heartbeat of the piece, and will help you break down the text to make sense of it. Scansion doesn't dictate what words or syllables to stress, necessarily, but rather acts as a tool to help you better understand the writing. For example, if you have a lot of run-on sentences, or some irregular structure in your piece, that could indicate the your character is in a heightened emotional place. Practice scanning every line in your piece. You can find more information [here](#).

8.

FINDING YOUR CHARACTER

“Part of our job as actors is to reflect the world around us. That’s what we do. Human beings have an extraordinary, constant fascination with themselves and how they belong in this world.”

—Helen Mirren

SUBCHAPTERS

- Go Out Into the World and Look for Your Character
- Pack Tiny Roles With as Much as You Can
- Root Fantasy Characters in Backstory
- Find Your Secret Message Inside the Story

CHAPTER REVIEW

Real life is one of Helen’s greatest inspirations—she says it will always be better than anything we can invent. Artists are constantly fascinated with human nature in that we write ourselves, paint ourselves, or act ourselves. Although actors are often mislabeled as narcissists, Helen reminds us that most actors are thoughtful, vulnerable, shy people, driven by a desire to tell stories.

Just like we are each grounded in our own life story, every character you play needs to be rooted in their own solid foundational story. Keep that story clear in your mind when you’re working on a role, rather than your own emotional journey or your ego. You have the chance to fill out even very small roles or nebulous fantasy characters with your imagination, pack them with as much life as possible. If you come up with ideas about your character’s background that affect the way you portray your character, don’t be afraid to share them with the director. But it’s also important not to be too precious with your ideas. If your idea is rejected, don’t take it personally.

Helen reminds us that even as we work to develop subtext for a character, we must never play the subtext outright. Let it simmer beneath the surface. Similarly, Helen encourages you to find a secret story for yourself within the greater story the play or film tells. Perhaps it relates to why you chose the role, or what connects you to the role on a deeply personal level. This is your private story—you don’t have to share this with anyone.

LEARN MORE

- Go out into the world and practice observing other people. Take a walk in an area with a lot of pedestrian traffic, ride public transportation, or go to a café. Pick one or two people to observe closely, focusing on things like behavior and posture, how they clench their jaw or not, if they tend to look down at the ground or up and around them. Think about what their backstory might be based on these things, and write it in your notebook.

8.

FINDING YOUR CHARACTER

LEARN MORE CONT.

- Pick up one of Shakespeare's plays and choose a character at random. Take a short speech, and read the scene aloud as if you were that person you just observed. See what happens. Gain insight and guidance for this exercise by clicking [here](#).

ASSIGNMENTS

- Review your Shakespeare monologue and make sure that the subtext and intention are clear. Crystalize what your goal is, what your relationship is to the person you're talking to, and what the context is. All this will inform your performance, making it richer and more believable.
- Write a backstory for your Shakespeare character. Use the play as a reference, keeping in mind the given circumstances. Use your imagination to add details that you can't find. Where are they from? How old are they? How many siblings do they have?, etc. Write everything down in your notebook so you can reference it later. If you need to jumpstart your imagination, [refer to this list](#) of exercises and specific questions you can ask of your character to shape their backstory. Then, consider how this backstory might change the way you perceive the character. Does their appearance or physicality change at all? Does it change or intensify your intention?
- Share your character backstory with your workgroup in [The Hub](#).

RESEARCH: FICTIONAL CHARACTERS

“If you’re entering into a world that you know nothing about, I think it’s kind of essential to go and seek out people who are in that world and just ask them questions.”

—Helen Mirren

SUBCHAPTERS

- Literal Research and Poetic Research
- Investigate the People, Not Just the Profession
- Learn From People in Your Character’s Profession

CHAPTER REVIEW

Research is an integral part of Helen’s process. She has two primary types of research: literal and poetic. Literal research encompasses the more concrete aspects of a character: their profession, lifestyle, their historical context. Generally this type of research will expand on things that can be found explicitly in the text. Poetic research requires you to use your imagination to think about your character’s world and their place in it. Helen uses the example of playing a mother whose son is in prison during the hunger strikes in Ireland. She thought about what it meant to be a woman living in these historical circumstances, on the front lines of violent conflict. Poetic research often comes after literal research, as you can start thinking about your character in their historical context, and what their choices illuminate about them.

It’s important to go meet people who do the work your character does so you can fully understand the role. Pay close attention to the body language people in your character’s field exhibit, to learn how your character may assert their power. Once you’re working on the role and performing it, you can let go of the literal research you did, and, having internalized it, trust it will inflect your acting.

LEARN MORE

- Choose a character from a film or play who lives through a historical era or event that fascinates you. Use both literal and poetic research for this work. Research what was happening at that time, and figure out who that character was in that context. Don’t worry about being correct—it’s more about the exercise. Think about who your character is and what’s important to them at this moment. What might they be coping with in their day-to-day life—politically, socially and emotionally? What are their responsibilities? Are they oppressed, and by whom or what? How does their historical moment shape them? How do the events of the time change them?

9.

RESEARCH: FICTIONAL CHARACTERS

ASSIGNMENT

- Research William Shakespeare himself and what it was like to be a playwright in his time. Specifically research the Globe Theatre in London, as well. What was the layout of this theater? How did the the public respond to his plays? What was it like to go to one of his plays? What was the class system like? What was it like to live in Elizabethan England? What was it like to be an actor in this time? Use your notebook to record what you discover.

RESEARCH: REAL CHARACTERS

“It’s so important to read your history. Do that research, but do it as an actor, not as a historian. And actors read history in a very different way from historians.”

—Helen Mirren

SUBCHAPTERS

- Ayn Rand: Discovering a Character in Video Footage
- Elizabeth I: Accessing Inaccessible Historical Characters
- Elizabeth I: Reading History as an Actor, Not a Historian
- Elizabeth II: Painting a Portrait
- Elizabeth II: Studying the Character as a Child
- Don’t Apply Your Research Literally

CHAPTER REVIEW

When you play a character based on a real person, your process must change to encompass concrete biographical research. Depending on the character, you’ll have different types of primary source information about them—video footage, historical accounts, and portraits are just a few examples. The less information available about a character—as Helen’s experience with Elizabeth I—the deeper you may have to dig and more creative you may have to get in your approach. Research will also help you determine where a character holds their power, and you will become closer to them through the research process—consider it another way into their psyche. For example, Helen realized when watching Ayn Rand on Phil Donahue’s show that Rand’s power was in her speed of thought, which was reflected in her unblinking eyes.

Helen encourages us to read history as an actor, not as a historian. When researching seemingly inaccessible royal characters Elizabeth I and Elizabeth II, Helen found that portraits were a helpful reference. Studying portraits allowed her to realize that she, too, was just another artist doing a portrait of the queen, which freed her of some of the intimidation she felt. Video footage of Queen Elizabeth II as a child offered another way into her character, which helped Helen understand her as a whole person—not just a figurehead.

If you are able to access footage of your character, pay close attention to their behaviors, down to the most minute gestures. However, remember that all this research is purely informative—there is no need to ever reference any of it literally while performing. If you’ve done this work, your performance will naturally reflect it.

10.

RESEARCH: REAL CHARACTERS

LEARN MORE

- Find a script about a historical figure in whom you're interested. Read the script, and then research the character. If they're alive, find video footage and study it. If not, read historical accounts and look for photographs or paintings of them. What did you learn about this character that wasn't present in the script? How did it change your perception of them? What was their childhood like and how did it bring them to the place where they are in the story?
- Think about Helen's notion of "poetic research" and apply it to this historical figure. For example: What is going on in the world and how might it affect them? What do their choices say about them? Who are they to themselves, and who are they to other people? Use [The Hub](#) to share some key points from both your literal and poetic research.

ASSIGNMENT

- Dig deep into your Shakespeare character's historical context. Is their play set in Elizabethan England, or another time and place? What conflicts are ongoing? Where do they rank in the class system? Research that period in detail, and use that research to understand the day-to-day life of your character. In your notebook, write a detailed account of what a day in their life might look like, start to finish. Connect with your workgroup in [The Hub](#) and share your day-in-the-life stories. Notice the differences in class and how drastically different your days might be.



11. & 12.

CREATING CHARACTERS: COSTUME, PARTS 1 & 2

“Your costume must absolutely serve your character and nothing else. Not your vanity, not how pretty you are, or how fat you are, or how thin you are. Just serve your character.”

—Helen Mirren

SUBCHAPTERS

- Costume Serves Your Character

CHAPTER REVIEW

Helen has a deep enthusiasm for costume, and she walks us through how various costumes serve the characters who wear them. Period costumes are more than just visual signals of a character’s place in history; they reflect the character’s personality, status, and way of life. Corsets, for example, restrict your breathing and thus transform your posture and movement. Details are essential in costumes like military fatigues, which may seem nonspecific and drab on the surface, but are rich with specificity, such as the placement of the belt buckle and the way the sleeves are rolled. If you don’t pay attention to these details, you may unwittingly be making a choice that’s not aligned with your character.

When choosing costume elements for your character—such as a cardigan, as Helen demonstrates—think through what piece your character would choose, and how they would wear it. Do they button it, or let it fall off their shoulders? Would it be freshly pressed, or look lived-in? Similarly, you must evaluate accessories through the lens of your character. Shoes should not be brand new; they should be worn in (assuming that your character didn’t just go out and buy them in the previous scene).

LEARN MORE

- [Choose](#) a film that has won or been nominated for an Oscar in the costume design category. If it’s a period piece, research the fashions of the time, and then observe how the designer executed them on screen. Watch the actors carefully and note how the costumes they wear inform their acting choices. Note any immediate clues the costumes give you about class or status. Do you notice a specific posture or way of walking that is consistent among multiple characters in the film? Is that influenced by what they are wearing? How can you apply these observations to your own costume choices in future roles?

11. & 12.

CREATING CHARACTERS: COSTUME, PARTS 1 & 2

ASSIGNMENT

- Create a costume inspiration board in your notebook for your Shakespeare character. What would your character wear—clothing, shoes, jewelry, and other accessories—to reflect their profession, class, or status? Remember that Shakespeare’s setting is fluid, so you may choose the time period in which you anchor your costume. For example, if your character is delivering news in a particular scene, you may want them to have a contemporary accessory such as a messenger bag. Map each costume choice to an aspect of your character, and clip photographs from magazines or the internet to include as visual aids. Sketch your character’s costume if you prefer. Share photos of your inspiration boards with your workgroup in [The Hub](#).

13. & 14.

CREATING CHARACTERS: HAIR & MAKEUP, PARTS 1 & 2

“Eyebrows are so important in makeup, especially on film....They are your instrument of expression.”

—Helen Mirren

SUBCHAPTERS

- Makeup and Hair Are in Service of the Character
- Makeup and Lighting
- Think of Your Face as the Empty Space
- When Possible, Freshen Up Before Your Close-Up
- Don't Get Stuck in Old Habits

CHAPTER REVIEW

Like costume, a character's hair and makeup are fundamental ingredients in the story you're telling. Helen emphasizes the difference between makeup for stage and for film. On stage, you're further away from the audience, so you must emphasize your features. Film is a much more intimate medium, and calls for a more subtle approach to your makeup. Wigs can not only shift your appearance, but also save you time.

Helen emphasizes the necessity of letting go of our vanity, and allowing our faces to be the empty space in which our characters can tell their stories. Don't carry any preconceived notions about your appearance, or a desire for beauty, into a given role. Ultimately, it's best to allow the makeup artist to be an artist. Work with him or her to create a look that you and the director are comfortable with. Let makeup and hair be another reflection of all the character work you've done up to that moment, and permit it to propel you even further into the role.

LEARN MORE

- Usually a makeup artist is on set with you when shooting a film; but if you're producing a film yourself, you may have to do your own. Watch these two tutorials to get sense of what you need to build a basic makeup kit for film makeup. [Watch this tutorial](#) for women on how to achieve a more natural look for film and television auditions.
 - [Watch this tutorial](#) for men.
- In the theater actors are almost always expected to do their own makeup. Read up on what you should have in your theater makeup kit [here](#) and [here](#).

No need to build this kit now, but keep this preparation in mind, and familiarize yourself with the difference between

13. & 14.

CREATING CHARACTERS: HAIR & MAKEUP, PARTS 1 & 2

makeup for stage and makeup for film.

ASSIGNMENTS

- Brainstorm the makeup looks you want for your Shakespeare character and add reference images to your costume inspiration board. Write out and/or draw the specifics of each look in your notebook, and why you chose that particular look.
- Let's do a screen test! Put makeup on one or both your Shakespeare characters. Start with the basic film makeup look covered in the tutorials above, then get creative from there—keeping in mind the guidelines for film makeup.



PREPARATION AND REHEARSAL

“Your job is just to allow your face to express whatever your feeling is. That’s your job....And this is what makes actors different from other people. Most people can’t do this. And if you are truly an actor, you can.”

—Helen Mirren

SUBCHAPTERS

- Learning Your Lines
- Know the Facts
- Research Experiences You Haven’t Had Firsthand
- Stay in Accent All Day
- Find a Dialect Coach Who Doesn’t Try to Act
- Overcoming Creative Blocks
- Try It Another Way
- Never Rehearse in Front of a Mirror

CHAPTER REVIEW

Learning your lines gives you the freedom to be in the moment as you work—especially in Shakespeare, wherein the material language is especially intricate. When preparing for *The Tempest*, Helen spent two months prior to shooting learning all her lines. With more modern text, you can get away with less involved memorization; though ultimately you should always strive for complete memorization. If you’re acting in a procedural drama, you must memorize the facts of your case, in addition to your lines.

If your character experiences things you haven’t, do your research. Seek out firsthand accounts of that experience, and be willing to go to some dark and perhaps uncomfortable places—this is part of your job. When playing Maria Altmann in *Woman in Gold*, Helen researched the Holocaust in order to have a fuller emotional understanding of her character’s disposition.

Accents indicate more than where your character is from—they also indicate your economic status and class. Accents don’t always come easily, so if you have to work to learn an accent, give yourself plenty of time to prepare. Helen admits she’s not naturally good at them, but she knows what she has to do to prepare herself. She recommends that you stay in an accent all day long so it becomes a part of you. If you have the privilege of working with a dialect coach, it’s extremely important that the coach doesn’t give you line readings. Remember, too, that your performance comes first, and a dialect should never overtake your acting. An accent or dialect is just another extension of your character.

No matter where you are in your career, all actors have creative blocks. If you’re stuck on a line, turn to your costars to help you. Don’t be afraid to ask another actor to say a line for you if it seems like it’s blocking you or you can’t get a certain way of saying it out of your head. If you’re feeling uninspired or simply stuck in the material, try playing it with an extreme emotion or state of being.

PREPARATION AND REHEARSAL

Never act in front of mirror. What's happening to you and your character is completely an internal experience. If you've done all your prep work, your face will naturally express what's actually going on in the moment. It should be an organic and fully felt experience.

LEARN MORE

- Experiment with learning a dialect of your choice. Start your research process online with [IDEA](#): International Dialects for English Archive. Some of the more commonly cast dialects in film and television roles include British Received Pronunciation (RP), Southern (American English), Midwestern, Russian, or Irish. Be specific in your choice, as there are nuances to each dialect depending on the city within the region. For example, a New Orleans dialect is different from a Kentucky dialect, even though both are part of the larger Southern dialect. Stay in that dialect all day and go out into the world with it. Order at a restaurant and call a friend on the phone to try it out.
- Screen a movie in which a character uses your chosen dialect. Notice how speech informs their character. Using your notebook, write down where exactly they are from—country, region, and city, if possible—and what their economic status and class are. Can you isolate sounds they make and pronunciations they use that differ from your own? Make a note of those sounds to help you further understand the dialect.
- If you struggle with learning lines, you're not alone—a lot of actors do. Find a method that works for you. For some, it's sitting down and going line by line, covering each with a piece of paper until it's memorized. If you're an aural learner, you might try recording yourself saying it; though make sure to read it in a monotone with little to no inflection. You don't want to learn the monologue with your own line readings!
- When preparing a scene that involves two or more people, the app LineLearner acts as a faux scene partner to run lines with. The app allows you to record all the lines in the scene, and then listen back to one or more characters' lines. Again, make sure you read the lines in monotone so you're not learning your own line readings.

15.

PREPARATION AND REHEARSAL

ASSIGNMENTS

- Memorize your monologue. If you find yourself tripping up in certain places, it may signal your need to build a firmer understanding of what you're saying. Focus on those places, returning to your notebook to make sure the way you translated them makes sense to you. Since Shakespeare is so linguistically and imagistically dense, you may find it helpful to break your monologue into segments to ease memorization. Try breaking your monologue up into three or four chunks of text, focusing on one new piece of it per day and building the memorization that way. For example, if it's your second day, repeat the first chunk of text as you go into the second, and so on. Continue to work on it until the speech is fully in your body.
- Get out of your comfort zone and perform your monologue off book and standing up. (When you perform it, you'll most likely be standing!) If you trip up somewhere, look at your personal translation again to see if you can pick up the thread.
- Have a partner come over and listen to your monologues. Do you notice that you're stuck in a line reading in any part where it keeps sounding the same? Ask your partner to say those lines for you. Rehearse them again. Do you notice a difference?
- Practice your monologues in the dialect you chose to learn. Does rehearsing your memorized lines in dialect free you?

HUMAN BEHAVIOR

“I guess that’s kind of an acting exercise, in a way—to be lifeless. Because mostly what we’re trying to do is pour life into ourselves as actors. But to let that go I guess is a very specific thing.”

—Helen Mirren

SUBCHAPTERS

- Surprise
- Physical Pain
- Nudity
- Sex
- Sleep
- Being Drunk
- Dying

CHAPTER REVIEW

Throughout your acting career, you will be asked to portray different types of human behavior or aspects of the human experience—and you’ll likely have to do them across multiple takes. Acting surprised requires imagination, but don’t be afraid to ask another actor to help you out and do something off camera that really does surprise you.

If you’re required to work with a stuntperson on a fight scene, it’s important to keep in mind that they are choreographers charged with choreographing a dance for you. When Helen did a fight scene in *The Debt*, the stuntperson told her that being stabbed is so painful that the body goes into a kind of shock. Don’t hesitate to ask the stuntperson how a certain action feels in the body.

Appearing nude on screen is something actors are sometimes asked to do, and the request is more common than when Helen started acting, and full frontal nudity was considered risqué. She found inspiration in the way Glenda Jackson handled herself on set when doing a nude scene: Jackson dropped her robe in front of the crew, showed them what she looked like from the front and the back, and said, “Let’s get to work.” This is what doing a nude scene is about: doing the work in a professional manner and not being ashamed about the way your body looks. It is simply part of your job.

Similarly, sex scenes are handled professionally with a bare-bones crew to allow for privacy. Because they have to be so choreographed, they’re quite technical (and, according to Helen, not actually sexy at all). Helen reminds you to consider if you’ll be comfortable shooting a nude or sex scene before you take the job, not on the day you’re supposed to shoot it.

Sleeping, playing drunk, and dying are all behaviors where your acting toolbox will be helpful. Remember that it’s all about research, even in the case of seemingly mundane activities. Research will lead to specificity, and the more specific you can be about each behavior, the better it will play to an audience.

HUMAN BEHAVIOR

LEARN MORE

- Watch *The Debt*, paying special attention to the fight scene at the end. Observe the actors and how they respond to being injured in the fight. Notice how specific and choreographed their movements are. Are you surprised by how real it looks now that you're thinking about it as acting and choreography?
- [Read](#) this article on playing drunk.

ASSIGNMENT

- Try your Shakespeare monologue in a few different ways. For example, try it drunk, and try it imagining that you're in severe physical pain. Notice how much concentration it takes. How did it change the way you performed the monologue? Was there more humor? More intensity?
- Look at some of Shakespeare's plays that have these behaviors written in:
 - Waking up: Juliet, *Romeo & Juliet*, act, 5 scene 3
 - Falling asleep: Titania, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, act 2, scene 2
 - Death: Hamlet, *Hamlet*, act 5, scene 2
 - Physical pain: Mercutio, *Romeo & Juliet*, act 3, scene 1
- Using one of these scenes, research that behavior, keeping a record of your research in your notebook. Then practice it! Memorize one or two lines before or after the behavior happens. Exchange notes and discuss with your classmates in [The Hub](#). What was challenging for you about it?

17.

FILM ACTING TECHNIQUE, PART 1

“You can’t say, ‘Oh,’ as a 19 [or] 20-year-old actor, ‘I’m going to be an actor without technique. It’s all just gonna be improvised and absolutely brilliant.’ Well, it won’t be. It’ll just be a mess, actually.”

—Helen Mirren

SUBCHAPTERS

- Stage and Film: Different Technique, Same Essence
- Francis Bacon on the Necessity of Technique, Part 1
- Francis Bacon on the Necessity of Technique, Part 2
- Find Freedom Within the Technique

CHAPTER REVIEW

Imaginatively, acting on stage and on screen are the same; but there are two big differences that affect the technique you use in film. One is the close-up—you can use your face as a more nuanced instrument when you’re working on camera. The other is control over your performance. When you’re in a play, you are in control of your performance entirely—how you move, when you move, when you command attention, or when you choose stillness. In film, you cede some of your control to a director and editor, who builds your performance through a series of shots.

The most versatile actors will devote themselves to learning both techniques to the best of their ability. The process of learning technique can be long and sometimes painful, but it’s necessary. During her process of learning film technique, she found inspiration in the book *Interviews with Francis Bacon*, in which Bacon discusses how having a mastery of technique affords you the ability to have moments of pure, out-of-control inspiration. Helen relates Bacon’s message to actors, reminding us that our most brilliant take will only be usable if we hit our mark.

LEARN MORE

- If you haven’t already, spend some time reading *Interviews with Francis Bacon* by David Sylvester. Though Francis Bacon is a painter and not an actor, Helen draws a compelling parallel between painting and acting when it comes to developing technique.

ASSIGNMENTS

- Invite a partner over to help film you performing your monologue using three different shots: a wide shot, a mid-shot, and a close-up. Perform your monologue in each shot to the best of your ability. Notice how doing a wide shot allows you to utilize your physicality and the space that you’re in, while the mid-shot and the close-up shift awareness of what’s happening in your eyes and on your face. Notice, too, how some of your body posture and mannerisms disappear in the close-up. Study each one. How do they differ? What would you change?

18.

FILM ACTING TECHNIQUE, PART 2

“I want my line to... [take] me by surprise. It comes bilaterally at me, not face on. That’s the only way I can describe it. I want it to be almost random or to take me by surprise.”

—Helen Mirren

SUBCHAPTERS

- Understand the Context of Your Shot
- Don’t Plan Your Performance Too Much
- Don’t Be Intimidated by Big Stars
- Save Your Energy for Your Close-Up
- Put It Out There and Let It Go

CHAPTER REVIEW

Helen encourages us to have a proactive awareness of how our scenes or shots fit into the overall film. In film, scenes are normally shot out of sequence. Make sure to familiarize yourself with the script supervisor, who is in charge of tracking continuity, and they can keep you informed of where you are in the story. It’s helpful to have an idea of the shot order at the beginning of your day, and don’t be afraid to ask what the next shot is if you’re lost.

Although film requires your mind to be running on multiple tracks at the same time, Helen reminds you to find freedom in the technique and stay in the moment. She recommends saving your energy and emotions for your coverage on camera, so that you don’t give away your performance if the camera is not on you. Finally, she encourages you not to obsess over every take. Once the take is done, you should let it go and move on to the next one.

LEARN MORE

- Read Michael Caine’s book *Acting In Film: An Actor’s Take on Movie Making*. He does an excellent job of discussing technique, covering things like eyeline, shot setups, and how to prepare for a film from an actor’s perspective. If you’ve never acted on film before, what in the book stands out for you? What do you feel challenged by? What excites you? Reflect on these three questions in your notebook.
- [Read](#) this article about the variety of shots used in film.

19.

FILM ACTING TECHNIQUE, PART 3

“There are no rules. Anything is possible, actually. And, you know, as you get older and you have more and more experience, you just learn that lesson more and more and more. So I have no rules about anything. It’s just the kind of actor that I am.”

—Helen Mirren

SUBCHAPTERS

- Learn to Work With Other Actors’ Processes
- Incorporate Challenging Feelings Into Your Performances
- Before the Take: Remind Yourself of the Character
- Between Takes: Concentrate and Compartmentalize
- Reach For a Baby-Like (or Dog-Like) State
- Don’t Study Your Performances

CHAPTER REVIEW

Film sets and theaters can be overwhelming and distracting places. To give your best performance, find a way to shut out the distractions and stay grounded in your own personal process. If you’re feeling lost or anxious, try developing a ritual to drop into your character or the moment in the story—maybe it’s a meditation or single word that you repeat to yourself, or maybe it’s as simple as reminding yourself of your intention before the scene begins. You can also look for inspiration in babies and dogs, as Helen does. They are so simple and so present when they are on camera that they’re always mesmerizing. Look for that state in yourself.

It’s important to remember that you are unique—all actors are, so be honest with what you need so you can do your best work. You might have a completely different way than your costar of getting prepared for a take. Stay true to your process, and don’t let other actors throw you off of this. If you’re struggling with a challenge on set, such as a co-star you don’t connect with, try to channel your feelings into your performance—use them, don’t fight them.

In the end, there are no rules. You will continue to learn as you go, and so much of what you do on set will come with experience. Surrender yourself to that fact, and continue to find the joy in your work.

LEARN MORE

- Find a relaxation and concentration technique that works for you. Do some research to find a simple breathing exercise or a basic meditation recording you can always have with you. Practice it before auditions, and see if anything shifts in your work. If you don’t currently have any auditions on the books, practice doing a five-minute exercise for breathing or meditation before you practice your Shakespeare pieces. See what shifts! Share your findings with your classmates in [The Hub](#). What exercises did you find helpful? Talk about what shifted when you meditated prior to starting.

19.

FILM ACTING TECHNIQUE, PART 3

ASSIGNMENTS

- Find a physical gesture for the moment before you do your Shakespeare monologue, as Helen did with *The Queen*. Physicalizing something in order to drop into your body as an actor is essential—it can be as tiny as a finger flick or as big as an arm swing. Take a moment to be silly and playful as you try to find it, and also to let it drop in and be serious. Play with this gesture a few times in the moment before you begin your monologue until it feels truthful.
- When you've found it, go into the monologue as you normally would. Is this helpful for you? Does it free you up in some way? Does it help you concentrate? Record this in your notebook so you can remember it as a tool for future work, and share it with your workgroup in [The Hub](#).

CASE STUDY: PRIME SUSPECT

“She’s realizing that she’s failing in her attempt to take over this case, and she’s having to deal with her anger, her disappointment her resentment, and her thought of, ‘How am I gonna get over this? I’m gonna get over this in some way.’ And there, the close-up is fantastic, because without any words, you can express all of those things.”
—Helen Mirren

SUBCHAPTERS

- Use the Close-Ups to Play Subtleties
- Be Conscious of Voice Level
- Befriend Your Camera Man
- Learn From the Technical Demands
- Learn How to Be Your Own Producer

CHAPTER REVIEW

Helen was fortunate enough to be cast as the series lead in *Prime Suspect*. This was a twofold victory for her. Working on the character Jane Tennison on a procedural television drama became her film acting technique boot camp. Also, the series itself was in many ways groundbreaking for women, especially in its portrayal of gender in the workplace.

Helen discusses a scene in which her character confronts her boss to demand the opportunity to take over a case from a recently deceased coworker. The “two shot” shows her character opposite her male boss. The edit then moves to close-up, conveying an intense emotional moment when Jane summons the courage to stand up for herself, despite the circumstances. Helen used the close-up shot to show Jane’s pent-up emotions and thoughts underlying this moment, without putting words to them. This skill is at the heart of what a film actor does: you know your character so well that even the tiniest thought registers on camera.

Helen recommends becoming familiar with both the camera and the cameraperson, who is also known as the director of photography, or DP. To educate herself, she would ask to look down the lens so she could see what the DP saw. On *Prime Suspect* Series 1, the DP’s style pushed Helen to be exact in her movements.

LEARN MORE

- Watch an episode of *Prime Suspect* Series 1, and look for the specificity in the cinematographer’s style that Helen discusses. See if you can start to identify the different types of shots: wide, two-shot, and close-up. Observe Helen’s character in close-up and how well she uses the camera. In your notebook, write down which shots stood out to you and why. Pause the show during those particular shots so you can really observe the frame and composition. What is it that draws you in?

CASE STUDY: PRIME SUSPECT

ASSIGNMENTS

- In film acting, part of your job is to know where the camera is, which requires immense concentration and, of course, practice. Getting behind the camera and creating your own work can be extremely helpful in this regard—use it as an opportunity to practice so that you’re prepared when you’re hired. It can be incredibly gratifying, as it will give you a sense of agency as an actor. If you’re a writer, take one or two pages of something you’ve written and film it using your cell phone camera. If you’re not a writer, choose a scene from a film you love and shoot it. Use two-person scenes for simplicity.
- Invite two friends to volunteer as actors, with you in the role of DP. Before you start, break down the scene so you have a basic shot list. Keep it simple. Note where you will do the establishing shot, where you will do individual coverage, and where a close-up may be necessary. Refer to Michael Caine’s book for references to shots if you feel lost. Give your actors marks, so that they have a road map of exactly where to go.
- Share your work and experience with your classmates in [The Hub](#). What worked? What was difficult or challenging? What did you learn?

CASE STUDY: *ELIZABETH I*

“You must drop that consciousness of yourself completely and simply play through the moment, the intention, the emotional journey in as real a time as you possibly can.”

—Helen Mirren

SUBCHAPTERS

- Make Sure the Staging Fits Your Character
- Find a Modern Approach to Period Language
- Keep Your Brain on Two Tracks: Emotion and Technique
- Read and Adjust to the Filmmaking Environment
- Dance a Pas de Deux With Your Cameraperson
- Play the Moment in Real Time

CHAPTER REVIEW

Helen’s work in HBO’s film *Elizabeth I* is an excellent case study of advanced film technique. In the first scene, we see her rallying the troops as they prepare for the possible arrival of the Spanish Armada.

Through her research, preparation, and character analysis, Helen decided that her version of Elizabeth would come down from an elevated, physical position of power and instead speak to her troops at ground level. She also believed that the moment called for movement, rather than delivering the speech from a stationary position. These aspects of the scene’s choreography came from Helen, as did the tone in which Elizabeth delivers the speech. Helen firmly believed it was not a moment for Elizabeth to be solemn; instead, she wanted Elizabeth to energize the troops. Throughout this scene, Helen had to keep her mind on two tracks: the emotional track and the technical track. This is the epitome of film technique: balancing an acute sense of where you are emotionally with an acute sense of where the camera is in relation to you.

In the second scene in this chapter, Elizabeth becomes frantic when she learns her lover has departed for Portugal, has an emotional breakdown in front of advisors, and then reins herself in as she remembers the demands of being queen. It’s an emotional and a technically challenging scene, as the director decided to do it all in one take. Here Helen had to employ the two-track thinking again, playing both the emotional moment of the scene in real time, while knowing exactly where the camera was. Helen also reminds us to resist the urge to watch ourselves in our heads, a habit which pulls us out of the moment.

LEARN MORE

- Screen *Elizabeth I*. Take note of all the scenes where there is movement. Where is she moving? Note how Helen always knows where the camera is. Where is the camera moving? Watch how skillfully she stays in the emotional moment despite the technical demands of long takes and a moving camera.

21.

CASE STUDY: ELIZABETH I

LEARN MORE CONT.

- Performing a speech like the one in the first scene requires vocal ability and training. Keep honing your vocal practice—you'll want this tool to be available down the road.
- To prepare, come up with a five-minute vocal warm-up you can do each time before you do your monologue. Make sure to incorporate at least two quick exercises for articulation. How does doing the warm-up shift your performance? Do you feel more in control of the language?

ASSIGNMENTS

- Continue to practice your Shakespeare monologue. Make sure your intention is clear. If your performance feels flat or uninspired, troubleshoot your intention. Refer to Karen Kohlhaas's book for a reminder of playable actions that you can work with. Also consider using a partner whenever possible—talking to an actual person instead of a wall is always better! (Be sure to practice both ways, since in an audition you will most likely be imagining your partner.)
- Get together with a partner and set up your camera in a wide-shot on a tripod. Practice your monologue and, if it makes sense to do so, incorporate some movement to it. Have your partner follow your movement with the camera on the tripod. Get creative and try some handheld camera work too. The important thing is getting used to moving around a space with a camera. No need to be perfect, just play and see what it feels like. Share your videos with your workgroup on [The Hub](#) and discuss what the experience was like for you.

CASE STUDY: THE QUEEN

“I’ve always been a proponent of the fact that it’s great not to have lines. And, obviously, not having lines forces you into working with your face, with your emotion, with just with your inner feelings.”
—Helen Mirren

SUBCHAPTERS

- Mannerisms Can Speak Louder Than Words
- Look With Intention

CHAPTER REVIEW

Helen’s work in *The Queen* illustrates the power of the nonverbal aspects of acting. In the scene in which the Queen is speaking with Tony Blair on the phone, Helen conveys the unease her character feels in this moment in the way she gingerly touches the paper, cleans her glasses with her sweater, and lines up her pens on the desk. Helen rooted these choices in the research she did, in which she discovered the young Queen’s obsession with neatness.

In the scene in which the Queen finally goes out to face the grieving crowd outside Buckingham Palace, Helen shows us how to root a look in the emotional life of the character. In Helen’s close-up, we see what’s happening in her mind through what’s happening in her face. Helen was able to convey this truthfully because she did the necessary research, watching archival footage of that moment, and because she allowed herself to exist in that moment as the character. In her imagination, she allowed herself to feel the terror that the Queen felt in that situation. Her inner emotional life was alive and active, her intention was strong, and the audience can see it.

LEARN MORE

- Watch *The Queen*. Note how much Helen uses stillness, where she uses it, and why she uses it. So much of this performance is in her eyes and in her mannerisms. Can you identify her intention in each of her close-ups? What is she conveying? Looking away from a close-up can also be a powerful tool. Start to think about how powerful your eyes are, and how you can use them more effectively in your film technique work.

ASSIGNMENT

- Set up a close-up shot with your cell phone camera for your Shakespeare monologue. Remind yourself of your intention, and then perform the monologue using your eyes to convey your intention. Try one take going over the top. Next, try one as you would for an audition. Post your second take in [The Hub](#) and discuss with your workgroup.

ACTING ON A FILM SET

“Get to know people, introduce yourself, and start learning because we are all, as I said, apprentices. This is an apprenticeship business.”
—Helen Mirren

SUBCHAPTERS

- Your First Day on Set
- Always Be Aware of What’s Going On
- Go Deep Into Your Imagination
- Learn the Intricacies of Working to Camera
- Get to Know Your Crew
- Always Be Willing to Do Another Take for Sound
- Befriend Your Script Supervisor
- Remember, We’re All in the Same Boat
- Don’t Be Afraid of the Unexpected

CHAPTER REVIEW

Helen lets us into the world behind the camera here. The ability to shut out distraction and to go deep into your imagination is crucial for success as a film actor. If you’ve never been on a film set, it may be eye-opening to see how many people are involved in a film crew. Does it give you a new respect for film actors and the amount of focus it takes?

When she arrives on set, Helen prioritizes making a relationship with the assistant directors, or ADs, to let them know her way of working and that she’s on top of things. She encourages us to get to know all of the crew members, as everyone’s in the same boat when working on a film.

When the director yells “Action!” don’t feel obligated to say your line immediately. You can take a moment to breathe before you begin. In this moment, if you’re shooting a wide- or two-shot, you’ll be working with another actor. Otherwise, when you’re doing your individual coverage, you’re often just acting to a piece of tape on the lens. With on-camera work, there are many variables at play, so always be open to doing another take—whether for sound or another reason.

Cultivate an awareness of all the moving parts on set, but also be ready to shut your awareness down and allow your performance to happen freely.

LEARN MORE

- If you haven’t been cast in a film yet—or even if you have—find ways to continue to gain exposure to the on-set environment. See if there are any films being shot in your area. Can you volunteer to be a PA to gain some on-set experience? Be helpful, listen, and learn what you can. Working behind the scenes first will offer you valuable experience you can bring to bear later in a casted role, and comfort that comes from already knowing how things work.
 - Record in your notebook what the experience was like for you. Did you learn any new positions in a film crew that didn’t know existed?
 - If you want to prepare yourself for the experience, [this is a great video](#) to watch beforehand on who’s who.

23.

ACTING ON A FILM SET

ASSIGNMENT

- Start to explore eyeline with your Shakespeare monologue. Have a partner come over to film you doing your monologue three times, with a different eyeline each time. Get a piece of colored tape you can put close to the lens or on a wall to help you focus on it. Watch your takes and decide which type of eyeline works best for you. Don't play directly into camera, as that is rarely done unless you're hosting, or unless it's a specific stylistic choice (one usually made by the director).
 - Michael Caine discusses eyeline in his book, as well, so use it as a reference if you need.

CHARACTERIZING THE SET

“The work with the set decorator can be very, very important, because if your character has a [personal] environment—their apartment, their flat—that environment obviously is going to tell the story of the character as much as the costume is.”

—Helen Mirren

SUBCHAPTERS

- Personalize Your Character's Space: Part 1
- Personalize Your Character's Space: Part 2

CHAPTER REVIEW

Set decoration is an integral part of storytelling in theater and film. Actors may overlook details of set decoration, but Helen encourages us to put thought into set dressing and what it can say about the character. She breaks down how changing the dressing of essentially the same set can tell very different stories about the character who inhabits that space.

The way your character's home looks can reveal the relationships they have: with their job, with their spouse, with themselves. It can be a gold mine of information for you. Take note of everything in the environment. How does the type of furniture relate to your character? Is it older and more antique, or is it hip and modern? Small choices like flowers, real or fake, can add another layer. An empty liquor bottle might tell us that they're a drinker, or maybe that they're lonely. The level of neatness or messiness will say another thing. Newspapers and books can indicate something about your character's intellectual life. Different furniture alignment may change your posture and how you sit.

If you're working with a set decorator and something they've chosen doesn't align with your character, feel free to talk with them. If it's possible, build the world that will best activate your imagination, while staying true to the director's vision of the project.

LEARN MORE

- Let's go back to observation. Think about one of the characters you observed in “Research: Fictional Characters.” Using your notes on their backstory, behaviors, clothing, etc., write a brief description of what their living space might look like based on what you observed. Pick one room in the house if that feels right, or cover the entire living space. Write this down in your notebook and keep for a role you may want work on in the future.

24.

CHARACTERIZING THE SET

ASSIGNMENT

- For your Shakespeare monologue, envision what the set would look like for your character. Add images or descriptions of set elements to your inspiration board. Look for images that reflect your character and the world they would live in, and describe or draw in detail what your character might be looking at on the “fourth wall,” the imaginary one between the stage and audience. Share photos of your board with your workgroup in [The Hub](#).

PROPS

“Go on the set when the camera’s being set up, and the lights are being set up. Find yourself a quiet little corner and just keep practicing with your props over and over, and over and over, and over again until it becomes second nature.”

—Helen Mirren

SUBCHAPTERS

- Practice With Your Props Until They’re Second Nature
- Use Props to Divert You From the Obvious
- Props and Continuity

CHAPTER REVIEW

Helen believes that props are an extension of your character. You should know them as well as possible, remembering that they are there to help you, not to distract from your scene. Be aware of how they work, and also the kinds of sounds that they can make. You should decide ahead of time exactly how you will use them—which pocket of your purse you’ll put your glasses in, for example. This level of familiarity with your props will make you feel like you actually live in that world—which is the ultimate goal.

If you find yourself blocked creatively in a scene or overthinking your lines, props can also help get you out of your head and into the moment. Helen uses the example of the rope—how playing with it distracted her just enough that she was able to give a more natural performance.

Continuity and props go hand in hand, as you will be expected to repeat the same action with your props through multiple takes. Think of it as a little piece of choreography that you make for yourself. And remind yourself that being cognizant of continuity is also a way of protecting your performance—so that you don’t make your best take unusable by mishandling a prop.

LEARN MORE

- Screen the movie *Cal*, in which Helen stars. Pay attention to the scene where she plays with the rope. How do you think it affects her performance? What might her performance have been like without it? Does it distract you, or does it add to the scene somehow?
- Helen also talks about Humphrey Bogart being a master at using props to his advantage. Screen a classic like *Casablanca* and track his use of props. In your notebook, write about what stood out to you, and notice any prop-related behavior that indicated subtext. For example, if he read as grounded in a scene, but his hands were fiddling with something like a cigarette what might that mean?

25.

PROPS

ASSIGNMENTS

*A word on auditions: bringing props is not customary. Unless specified in the script in some way, it's better not to.

- Pick a prop that your Shakespeare character might have. Maybe it's a cigarette, a piece of rope, or a makeshift weapon. Get creative!
- Practice your monologue with awareness of the prop. Use it where it seems effective. It may not be effective, and it may actually distract you. But it may ground you. Take note of this, and record your experience in your notebook.*

WORKING WITH WRITERS & DIRECTORS

“In the end, what we do on the screen is an absolute collaboration—The first moment of the inception of this baby that we’re all putting out into the world, taking its little, toddling steps out to the world.”

—Helen Mirren

SUBCHAPTERS

- Nurture Good Relationships With Writers
- Collaborate to Strengthen the Dialogue
- Negotiate Using the Correct Channels
- Suggest New Scenes With Backstory in Mind
- Learning From Robert Altman’s Freedom

CHAPTER REVIEW

For Helen, the collaboration between actors and writers is an exciting part of the process. She reminds us that the foundation of a good collaborative relationship is mutual respect—you must remember that as an actor you are bringing your own artistry to the piece, just as the writer has brought theirs. Respect their ideas. You did, after all, choose to take the role.

As an actor, your job is to distill and make sense of the material that you are given—good or bad. Good writing will almost fly off the page and may even be easier to memorize, because the writer has accounted for the subconscious elements in your character’s mind. Bad writing is quite the opposite, and you’ll probably really have to work to learn it. A great playwright like George Bernard Shaw is a great example of brilliant writing. Though his work includes many long speeches, they tend to be easy for an actor to master because so much of the work has already been done in the writing.

If you’re struggling with a particular piece of writing in a script, don’t be afraid to be a problem solver. If something just doesn’t sound right on the page, or you have an instinct about your character based on your prep work, propose a change. Just make sure to seek the correct channels on set to communicate your ideas—it will likely be a conversation with the producer or director. You can also look for support from your costars. Helen encourages us each to be thoughtful, and a bit of a squeaky wheel when needed—do whatever is in your power to best serve the film.

Helen shares lessons learned from working with renowned director Robert Altman on the film *Gosford Park*. He was known for creating a sound story that existed within the film, and mic-ing all the actors, even the ones who weren’t in frame, or a particular shot. He believed that when it came to storytelling, sound was just as important as any visual element. If you watch his films, you can see that there’s almost a theatrical element to the way he works, something all-encompassing.

26.

WORKING WITH WRITERS & DIRECTORS

LEARN MORE

- Familiarize yourself with good writing by reading some of George Bernard Shaw's plays. *Pygmalion* and *Major Barbara* are good ones to start with. Try memorizing a monologue that inspires you, and pay attention to how the thoughts seem to flow together. What qualities make the writing compelling?
- Helen talks about her experience working with Robert Altman on *Gosford Park*. Screen the film and notice how he uses sound. Do you notice how dialogue is coming from places that aren't necessarily in the frame? Also take note of the camerawork: where he makes jump cuts, and where the camera keeps rolling. What about this technique makes it theatrical?
- Connect with your classmates in [The Hub](#). Discuss what scene stood out for you, in particular where you felt like the sound was a key element in storytelling.

ASSIGNMENT

- Invite a partner over to act as a director for you. Perform both your Shakespeare pieces, and ask your partner to give you a note after each. Incorporate their notes, and perform your monologues again. If something didn't feel right, tell them why. If their notes helped change your performance positively, talk about why that happened for you.

CONCLUSION

“People say, in a few words, [what is] your advice for young actors?’ And I always say, ‘Be on time. Don’t be an asshole.’ And that’s it.”
—Helen Mirren

SUBCHAPTERS

- Be on Time, Be Polite, Be Self-Protective
- Parting Thoughts

CONGRATULATIONS

Congratulations! You’ve finished your MasterClass with Helen Mirren. We hope you feel inspired to continue the work of honing your acting technique, so that you may find Helen’s “holy chalice” of freedom within your work as an artist.

We want to make sure that your experience with Helen and your peers doesn’t end when you finish watching the video chapters. Here are a few ways to stay in touch:

- Join the Helen Mirren community in [The Hub](#) to connect with your peers.
- Contribute to the lesson discussions after each video lesson and read what others have to say.
- Upload your relevant assignments in [The Hub](#) for feedback from your classmates.
- Submit an Office Hours question to Helen.

YOUR FINAL ASSIGNMENTS

- If you can, choose one of your Shakespeare monologues and audition with it for a local production.

See what happens. Think about how you felt in the audition and perhaps what you could improve on for next time. If it’s your first time doing a Shakespeare monologue, go easy on yourself! It takes a lot of practice, and you will get there.

- If you can’t find a Shakespeare production, make it a point to audition for whatever you can. The more, the better. Get in the habit of reading scripts, learning sides quickly, and breaking down the scene.

Share your experience with your classmates in [The Hub](#). Keep in touch with them, and whenever you’re able to audition with your monologues, discuss!

BONUS: NATURALISM

“They have the courage to put themselves out there into the world of poetry, into the world of heightened work; but at the same time, with naturalism.”

—Helen Mirren

SUBCHAPTERS

- Marlon Brando
- Anna Magnani
- Beyond Naturalism

CHAPTER REVIEW

Marlon Brando and Anna Magnani were renowned for their naturalistic acting style. Brando’s performance in *Julius Caesar* (1953) is emblematic of the effort among 20th-century actors to naturalize Shakespeare while remaining truthful to the playwright’s poetry. Because such heightened text does much of the actor’s work, it’s beautiful to see it in a more realistic, less declamatory state.

Anna Magnani is one of Helen’s greatest inspirations in film acting. Helen was drawn to Magnani’s palpable aliveness, bravery, and her ability to think fast. In the clip from *Mamma Roma* (1962), Magnani demonstrates amazing concentration as she interacts with the other actors in a natural, easy way while walking up the street toward a moving camera. Concentration is one of the most valuable tools for an actor. In *Bellissima* (1951), Magnani demonstrates the art of turning “on a sixpence,” or acting at the speed of thought. Humans do it all the time—we don’t think, we just do. This skill is especially necessary in Shakespeare. It requires ample time to prepare and study your material, so that you know the character’s intentions inside and out.

Although revolutionary in Brando and Magnani’s time, naturalism is now deeply enmeshed in modern acting practice. Acting will continue to evolve with us. Helen encourages us to watch other actors—especially ones we admire—with a critical eye, and to think about the choices they make. Keep in mind whether their choices align with choices you would make, or if you would do something differently. Don’t worry about copying other actors, but study them for inspiration and influence.

LEARN MORE

- Watch *The Fugitive Kind* (1960) with Marlon Brando and Anna Magnani. Do you agree with Helen that Marlon Brando looks affected while Magnani reads as more natural? Why does Brando seem affected while Magnani does not? Track this throughout the film and write about it in your notebook. Are these observations useful for your own acting?

28.

BONUS: NATURALISM

LEARN MORE CONT.

- Watch *Bellissima* (1951) and pay attention to the scene in which Anna Magnani argues with her husband. Did you notice an emotional shift? How do you think she got from A to B on such a quick turn? Was it a change of intention? Look at your Shakespeare character throughout their play and see if there's an instance in which you must turn "on a sixpence." (This is also sometimes known as a "beat change.") How might you make that happen?

MASTERCLASS

