

# Scenario: Instructor's Guide

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## Introduction

*Scenario* is a program that allows users to “block,” or design the actors’ movements in a scene from one of Shakespeare’s plays. For each short passage, users create “frames” that show where actors and props should be; they can then move from frame to frame individually, commenting on each frame if they wish. The program creates individual files for each user and each scene as required.

The finished file can then be submitted to an instructor, who in turn can comment both on each frame and on the project as a whole.

## What You Will Need To Use *Scenario*

*Scenario* is available for both PC and Macintosh computers. Files can be shared between both kinds of computer.

### Minimum System Requirements

<i>PC</i>	<i>Macintosh</i>
Windows 95 or better	System 8.0 or later
Pentium 133Mhz	Power PC or better
16Mb of RAM	16Mb of RAM
Colour monitor (800 x 600 recommended)	Colour monitor (800 x 600 recommended)

## Instructional Level

The program can be used with students from the High School level to introductory College or University.

## Instructional Objectives

*Scenario* is designed to encourage students to become directors rather than merely readers of Shakespeare. It will encourage them to see his plays as blueprints for action rather than flat words on the page: like a score in music, the text of the play is waiting to be given life by performance.

Many students will be familiar with Shakespeare on film, but the stage is very different from film, and the Elizabethan stage very different from a modern stage. The program provides an opportunity for students to learn about the limitations and strengths of a flexible acting space that relied far more on language than on scenery or special effects. It is important to introduce basic concepts of staging to students if they are to understand what they can achieve: the effects of grouping, moving around the stage, gaining the power of centre stage, and the importance of the way that an invasion of personal space can underline and heighten the effect of the language

and action. Some sense of the kinds of “business” that can be inferred from the text is also important.

Shakespeare’s actors were highly professional, and must have needed surprisingly little direction in the production of plays. They seldom acted the same play two days following, and often put on four or five in a single week. So they must have relied on many basic conventions for movements, entrances and exits. Often the texts we have of the plays are vague about details of staging. Even the few annotated promptbooks that survive from the period are sketchy, listing in the margin only those items that may cause problems: child actors, musicians, and large props (like beds) must be got ready.

The stage on which the action will take place is a reconstruction of the Globe Theatre, as illustrated in *Shakespeare’s Life and Times*. As students use the program, they will become familiar with the kinds of actions that were possible on the Elizabethan thrust stage with little change of scene and with consequent opportunity for flowing action. They will realize both the advantages and disadvantages of acting in the small upper stage, and the limited possibilities of central curtain for “discovery” scenes where actors hide from each other.

A good introduction to the nature of the Elizabethan stage is the “book” of *Shakespeare’s Life and Times* that discusses its history and structure. There is an example of the kind of choices that are available in *Scenario* in the chapter “a scene performed.”

### **Scenario in the Classroom**

There are several ways that *Scenario* can add to the students’ appreciation of Shakespeare.

- Students can work separately or in groups.
- They can be asked to choose different scenes, then to look at each other’s.
- They can all work on the same scene, then compare different solutions to the same problems of production.

### **On “Directing” a Scene**

One of the first things a director does when working on the production of a play is to “block” the scenes, working out what the text implies in terms of movement across the stage, the groupings of characters, the manipulation of props, stage “business” and so on. *Scenario* makes it possible to do this by a simple process of selecting a short passage of the text, then selecting characters and props from menus, and dragging them to the appropriate place on the stage. In this way, students can create a series of frames, as they work through the scene. Students can then review or edit the frames they have created.

Blocking is one of the first steps in creating an actual performance: the actors themselves flesh it out in rehearsal. For this reason, the characters in the plays are represented as stylized images rather than fully formed images, in order to emphasize that the program is designed to sketch the actors’ movements, rather than to create a full animation of the scene. While the program uses some of the tricks of computer games to activate the students’ interest, it is intended to focus on the conditions of the early stage rather than the tricks of the modern computer.

Texts and characters from three frequently-taught tragedies are provided so that they can choose which play you want to direct. The texts retain the often cryptic and uninformative stage directions of the originals so that students should be encouraged to uncover the many hidden clues in the words as to where actors move, who they are talking to, and so on. The limited number of stage directions in the originals means that the director of Shakespeare has to work harder than the director of many modern plays to figure out what is happening on stage; correspondingly, however, there is greater freedom in interpretation.

Students should be aware that this is not an animation program: because it is a tool for blocking the scene, the characters are stylized, and have only a limited number of positions available. Each frame, however, has a text window for entering additional comments, so students can be encouraged to explain why they make choices, and what additional instructions they might give their “actors” in terms of action, gesture, tone of voice, and so on. The result is that students are focused more on the questions that arise from actually staging the play, rather than creating a computer animation of it.

### **Preparing Students for the Assignment**

It is a good idea before the students begin to take a scene as an example and to go through it in class in some detail, discussing the various problems the actors and producer need to solve before they can put on a compelling performance. Depending on the scene the instructor chooses, the problems may include:

- **Entrances and exits.** The need to get characters on and off stage smoothly, using the two main doors, and the third entrance in the middle if necessary.
- **Contrast.** The need for a contrast between moments of movement and stillness as the mood of the scene changes.
- **Who is talking to whom?** This is especially important in scenes with several characters. Often one needs to prepare a conversation by drawing the characters apart before they begin to speak, so the student will need to look through the whole scene carefully before beginning.
- **Stage business.** Often there are hints in the text that suggest action of some kind; at other times one needs to generate interest or make ideas more explicit by the use of movement or props.
- **Sound Effects.** The program offers a limited number of sound effects. It is important to decide how often and how obtrusively they might be used.
- **Costumes.** Students cannot change the costumes in the play, but they can be asked to comment on the way the chosen costumes make some decisions about character—and they may indicate that they would choose a different emphasis.

In each case, the students can indicate why they have made the choices they have, by adding detailed stage directions to the text, or by using the Comment window that is available on each frame as it is edited.

### **Commentary by the Student**

#### **Production Decisions**

*Scenario* allows students to comment on the production as a whole, and on each frame individually. These features can be used in different ways.

- The general comment, available from the **View** menu (**Project Info**), can be used to give an overview of the scene. If students are asked to comment on their own production, they will be encouraged to think about their decisions, and to justify which of various alternatives they choose. They can be asked to explain what they think are the most important actions in a scene, for example.
- The passages that the student selects for each frame can be modified by adding more detailed stage directions, indicating the tone of voice the characters would use, gestures they would make, and so on

- Comments on individual frames can be used to explain such things as why a prop is used, or why a character turns away from the speaker. A special window for comments opens when the student clicks on the **Notes** button, or selects **Notes** from the **View** menu.

### **Submitting a project for review**

Students can submit projects by attaching their file to an email message, or by copying it to disk and handing it in. Files are reasonably compact, and a student (the Director) can work on a different kind of computer from the Reviewer. Remind your students to create a project name that is informative and includes some form of their name: it can be confusing indeed to get half a dozen assignments all called “Hamlet scene 2.shk.”

### **Reviewing Your Students’ Work**

When you review your students’ work, you will open the files you receive from them, and the program will recreate their work for you to see.

From the **Options** menu, select the item **Select Mode**. You will see a dialogue box that will enable you to select **Reviewer** (it's a good idea to click also on the check box so that the program remembers that you are reviewing when you have a batch of assignments to mark). Once you are in Review mode, you will be able to click on the button at the bottom of the stage that brings up a separate window into which you can type comments on individual frames.

To see the student’s overall comment, and to insert your own summary response, from the **View** menu select **Project Info**: you will see a window that includes space for both summary comments. This is a good place to insert the student’s grade, as well as your overall comment, since it the first place the student will look when opening the file that you send back to them.

(Alternatively, students could use this feature to comment on each other’s work, asking questions or making suggestions (it would be a good idea in this case to give the students copies rather than originals, since there is always the risk of accidentally moving characters).

You will find that you can “page” through the frames, looking at the student’s comments on each, and in turn commenting in the Review window if you have suggestions or notes of encouragement.

Save the project (preferably with a new name); it is now ready to send back to the student so that he or she can see all you have said.

### **About the Stage**

The graphic for the stage is based on the design of the New Globe in London, which in turn is based on extensive research into the documents that tell us about Shakespeare’s theatre. You can visit their site to see the background of research at <<http://www.reading.ac.uk/globe>>, and can explore the section of *Shakespeare’s Life and Times* that looks at the same evidence.

One possibly surprising quality of the reconstruction of the Globe is its ornate quality, yet there are contemporary descriptions of the theatre that indicate very clearly that the acting company created a lavish and luxurious appearance as part of the sense of holiday that the theatre inspired.

The two main doors at the rear of the stage are perhaps the most important device in the shaping of scenes acted on it. Actors can enter from one door while those from the previous scene are exiting from another (see the sample scene created as part of the *Life and Times*). The central curtained entrance in the middle of the rear wall was probably less often used. It was the “discovery-space” where Polonius hides when he is eavesdropping, or where Romeo hides from his pursuers after the masque where he meets Juliet. The curtain can be opened or closed.

The two pillars on the stage, holding up the roof above it, can also be used for overhearing, or for other occasions when characters withdraw from the action; characters can be moved behind the pillars.

The “balcony” was probably partly used by high-paying spectators, with the central area part of the acting space when needed. In *Romeo and Juliet*, Juliet appears from a “window” rather than a balcony (the term “balcony scene” developed in the Victorian period when stage sets were elaborate and romantic). The upper level was also used for scenes where characters appear on the “walls” of a castle or city. In *Scenario*, the whole upper level is available for characters, who will appear to be behind the railing when they are placed there.

The roof of the stage was called the “heavens” and was probably decorated with images of the major constellations; in this reconstruction the design is kept deliberately simple so that it distracts less from the characters on stage. The texture of the stage itself is designed to look like the rushes that were strewn there to reduce the sound of footsteps on the wooden surface of the stage.

The art work for the image of the Globe stage was created by Chris Chong.

### **About the Costumes**

An interesting topic for discussion with your students is the extent to which costume will change how we respond to a play. There are some excellent examples of variations in costume and setting in recent films of Shakespeare; the Renaissance costuming of Zeffirelli’s 1968 *Romeo and Juliet* contrasted with the very modern setting of Baz Luhrmann’s 1998 film; the medieval costuming of Zeffirelli’s *Hamlet* (starring Mel Gibson) contrasted both with Kenneth Branagh’s nineteenth-century setting, and the recent Almereyda film with Ethan Hawke, set in very modern New York. *Scenario* offers three periods in the three plays: *Romeo and Juliet* is costumed in Italian medieval / early Renaissance style; *Hamlet* in full Renaissance costume (implying that Shakespeare’s company would have used what then was modern dress), and medieval Scottish costume for *Macbeth*.

The evidence from Shakespeare’s time is that they would have used a rather eclectic mix of costume. The early sketch of a performance of *Titus Andronicus* suggests that the central characters would have been costumed in something approximating historical costume (in this case Roman), while subordinate characters would have worn their usual modern (Renaissance) costume. The reason for this is clear enough: economy. It would have been simply too costly to have provided full period costumes for all actors. Only the extravagant and expensive performances of masques at Court would have involved the creation of special costumes for all performers.

In the discussion above, I pointed out that the characters—and their costumes—are stylized rather than realistic, in order to focus attention on the activity of “blocking” the scene as it might have been on the original stage, rather than creating a modern computer animation.

The design of most of the costumes is based on those in the book of Renaissance costumes by the Italian Cesare Vecellio (*Vecellio’s Renaissance Costume Book*. New York: Dover Publications, 1977).

#### ***Hamlet***

Although *Hamlet* is set in early medieval Denmark, the costumes chosen for this production are those of Shakespeare’s time. The probability is that this is how Shakespeare’s company would have staged it. Shakespeare’s early Denmark coexists with the much later University of Wittenberg where Hamlet studies, and the clearly articulated conflict between Christian and pre-Christian views of revenge in the play set it in an intellectual and religious climate much closer to Shakespeare’s day than the original story.

Hamlet is dressed in black as he is still in mourning, and refers to his “inky cloak.” The Ghost is in armour, as described by Horatio, and Horatio is shown as if he were studying for the Church. The text is not specific on this point, but it suits his character, as he is always on the fringe of the action not in the centre.

### ***Romeo and Juliet***

The general period of the costumes in *Romeo and Juliet* is early Italian early Renaissance. Thus the young male characters wear tights rather than breeches; the intention is to emphasize their youth. Servants for the Capulets and Montagues are essentially the same figures with different “liveries” or uniforms; they are apparently opposed to each other, but behave in the same manner, so are made to look alike.

### ***Macbeth***

Traditional Scottish dress has changed little over the years, so most characters wear kilts, sporrans, and many of them carry staves. The witches are not taken from the contemporary sketch in Shakespeare’s source (see the section in the *Life and Times*), where they appear like rather elegantly dressed ladies. It is clear that Shakespeare imagined them very differently.

