Act I, scene i

1. How does Shakespeare begin the play with an immediate sense of suspense?
2. What important exposition is revealed in this scene?
3. Why has Horatio been asked to join the soldiers in the night watch? What has he decided to do?
4. What are the beliefs about ghosts revealed in this scene? How is this relevant?

Act I, scene ii

1. What items of business does Claudius take up with the Court?
2. What evidence of wrongdoing or corruption is evident in Claudius’s opening speech?
3. Why didn’t Hamlet become king when his father died?
4. Why is Laertes permitted to return to school in Paris, but Hamlet forbidden to return to school in Wittenberg?
5. What does Hamlet’s first soliloquy reveal about his state of mind?
6. What aspect of Hamlet’s problem seems to bother him the most?
7. Why is Claudius in Denmark? Laertes?
8. Do you think Hamlet’s behavior is reasonable, or do you agree with his mother that he needs to change it? Why/why not?

Act I, scene iii

1. Explain the reasons that Laertes and Polonius give Ophelia to convince her not to trust Hamlet’s love.
2. How does Ophelia respond to Laertes’s advice? To her father’s?
3. What is comical about Polonius?

Act I, scene iv

1. What is going on inside the castle during this scene? Why?
2. Why is the ghost thought to be an evil omen? (other than the fact that…well…it’s a ghost)
3. What is the point of Hamlet’s comparing the State and an individual man? What motivates this comparison?

Act I, scene v—Be sure to view the close reading exercises to dissect the ghost’s speech.

1. What does the Ghost reveal about the way he died?
2. What does the Ghost warn Hamlet about his mother? Why?
3. What does Hamlet plan to do about the information he gets in this conversation?
4. How does Hamlet plan to get away with his plan? Who will help him? How?

Act II, scene i

1. What does Polonius expect his servant Reynaldo to do in Paris?
2. Historical connection- Why would Polonius immediately jump to the conclusion that Hamlet is mad for Ophelia’s love?
3. What scared Ophelia most about Hamlet’s visit to her room? How might this episode contribute to the overall calamity of the tragic plot?
4. Does Polonius’s behavior in this scene change the opinion of him you formed earlier? Why?

Act II, scene ii

1. Why are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern at the Court?
2. Reread Hamlet’s first exchange with Polonius. Dissect the language. How is the language different? What puns does Hamlet use? Why are they significant? How does Polonius talk? What does this reveal about his character?
3. How does Polonius plan to test Hamlet?
4. What is the level of trust Hamlet has for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern? What does he tell them the real problem is?
5. What is unusual about the player’s monologue about the Fall of Troy? What does Shakespeare achieve by including this allusion?
6. What is Hamlet’s next step in the plan?
7. What would be a good subtitle for this act? (*Hamlet: the* ­­\_\_\_?\_\_\_\_)

Act III, scene i

1. Why does Ophelia return Hamlet’s gifts?
2. Dissect the “To be or not to be” soliloquy to determine Hamlet’s grievances. Refer to the close readings.
3. Explain the ambiguity of the nunnery scene.

Act III, scene ii

1. How do Hamlet’s instructions to the Players relate to a major concern of the play? How does this advance the plot, develop character, or help establish theme?
2. What does Hamlet admit to Horatio and the audience just before the company arrives to view the play?
3. Why does Hamlet speak to Ophelia in such vulgar terms?
4. What does Gertrude’s reaction to the play indicate?

Act III, scene iii

1. How does the play-within-the-play influence the action of the play?
2. Why can’t Claudius pray?
3. Why doesn’t Hamlet kill Claudius when he has the opportunity?

Act III, scene iv

1. What is Hamlet’s reaction to the killing of Polonius?
2. What does this scene reveal about Gertrude’s guilt?
3. What is the significance of the second appearance of the ghost?
4. How has Hamlet changes since the beginning of the play? Why? Expand.

Act IV, scene i and ii

1. What is the apparent purpose of scene ii?

Act IV, scene iii

1. Claudius gives a reason for sending Hamlet out of the country instead of making him subject to the law. What is it?
2. Do Rosencrantz and Guildenstern know the true purpose of their journey to England?

Act IV, scene iv

1. Why is Fortinbras’s army in Denmark?
2. What is the purpose of this scene? Why does Hamlet see himself as compared to Fortinbras?

Act IV, scene v

1. What information does Claudius reveal?
2. What do they assume is the cause of Ophelia’s apparent madness?
3. Why do you think Ophelia’s madness takes on the form it does?
4. Research: How do the flowers Ophelia distributes relate to the characters and her actions? Think symbolically.

Act IV, scenes vi and vii

1. What will happen to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern?
2. Why does Claudius tell Laertes he will not kill Hamlet himself?
3. In Gertrude’s description of Ophelia’s drowning, what suggests that Ophelia committed suicide?
4. In Gertrude’s description of Ophelia’s drowning, what suggests that Ophelia’s death was an accident?

Act V, scene i

1. Discuss the dramatic irony of the opening scene of Act V.
2. What is the significance of the various skulls the gravedigger digs up during this scene? How do they contribute to the evolution of Hamlet’s understanding of death?
3. How does Hamlet’s speculation to Horatio emphasize the lessons Hamlet learns?
4. What does Laertes and Hamlet’s fight in Ophelia’s grave foreshadow?
5. How does this scene differ in form and style from other scenes? Why?
6. Did Hamlet love Ophelia? What is the evidence for each position?

Act V, scene ii

1. What does Horatio learn about the real purpose for the trip to England?
2. What distinction does Hamlet see between the behavior of Laertes and that of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern?
3. What is ironic about the impending deaths of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern?
4. How does the impending duel with Laertes complete Hamlet’s concept of death that has been developing through the play?
5. Why does Hamlet apologize to Laertes? How is the duel a “win-win”?
6. Explain how each character dies in the end.
7. How is the end of the play an illustration of justice?

Full Play

1. What is the effect of the Full Court scenes in Acts I, III, and V?
2. How is Hamlet’s story a coming-of-age story?
3. What is Hamlet’s tragic flaw?
4. What ideals of human conduct are expressed in the play?
5. How successful is Hamlet in fulfilling the task his father gave him?
6. Do you believe Hamlet really goes mad, or does he simply pretend? Why?
7. Revisit your 8 envelope questions.