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Reflections:

*A Student Response Journal for...*

*Rosencrantz and  
Guildenstern Are Dead*  
*by Tom Stoppard*

written by Rebecca Challman

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*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*

## To The Teacher

In order to allow the teacher maximum flexibility in his or her approach, we have grouped the prompts by sections. The teacher may, therefore, assign specific prompts or allow the students to select one or more prompts from each section

For *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, we also have these materials:

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*Rosencrantz & Guildenstern are Dead* borrows from three major sources: Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, and T.S. Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*. Make no mistake, however, this admittedly derivative play is by no means unoriginal. Tom Stoppard offers unique insight into the human condition (often sad, often laughable, but always hopeful), the nature of art (theatre), the nature of death, fate vs. personal responsibility, and the simultaneous joy in, and inadequacy of, language.

Note: In Act One, the Player suggests a pornographic performance, first to Rosencrantz and then, because Ros is too naïve to grasp his meaning, to Guildenstern. The Player offers his obscenity in a subtle fashion, but Guild understands and, taken aback, responds with violence.

In Act Two, the Tragedians perform "*The Murder of Gonzago*." This is, of course, the play within a play from *Hamlet*. The players perform passionate scenes of an incestuous relationship; a widow queen beds her dead husband's brother who turns out to be his murderer. Hence, a few scenes are filled with sexual innuendo played for humor.

More importantly, *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* assumes that the reader has some familiarity with Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Students can read and enjoy the play without first reading *Hamlet*, but they will not be able to appreciate it fully. *Hamlet* lends the play its characters, however inverted, its settings, however stripped down, and its rich appreciation for language.

## **To The Student**

Although we may read a novel, play, or work of non-fiction for enjoyment, each time we read one, we are building and practicing important basic reading skills. In our ever-more complex society, in which reading has become more and more crucial for success, this, in itself, is an important reason to spend time reading for enjoyment.

Some readers, however, are able to go beyond basic reading techniques and are able to practice higher thinking skills by reflecting on what they have read and how what they read affects them. It is this act of reflection—that is, stopping to think about what you are reading—that this journal is attempting to encourage.

To aid you, we have included writing prompts for each section; however, if you find something that you wish to respond to in the book more compelling than our prompts, you should write about that. We hope you enjoy reading this book and that the act of responding to what you have read increases this enjoyment.

After you read the indicated sections, choose the questions to which you will respond. Keep in mind that there are no right or wrong answers to these prompts, and there is no one direction in which you must go.



\_\_\_\_\_

# Response Sheet

Name\_\_\_\_\_ Section\_\_\_\_\_ Date\_\_\_\_\_

[illegible]

## **Background/Pre-reading**

1. Tom Stoppard began his writing career, at the age of seventeen, as a free-lance journalist and theatre critic. He loved the theatre, but thought he would be better at creating art than he was at critiquing it. He wrote his first play at the age of twenty-three. He did not have a major hit, however, until he reintroduced theatre audiences to the characters Rosencrantz and Guildenstern in 1967. It is ironic that a man who loves the theatre should become famous for a play that pokes fun at it. For, *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern are Dead* is not so much a story as it is a dialogue, which cleverly skewers the artificial nature of theatre.

Imagine you are a playwright and you have written a scathing play about one of society's cornerstones: family; religion; community; education; politics; or the legal system. Write a character monologue that clearly delineates your opinion.

2. *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern are Dead* is a black comedy based on a Shakespearean tragedy. In it, Tom Stoppard reveals how the events of *Hamlet* unfold for two of the play's minor characters. He basically asks himself, "What if the two spies from *Hamlet* had personalities? What if audiences could see events through the eyes of Ros and Guil?"

What if you could take two of literature's minor characters and turn them into stars? What original text and characters would you choose? Write a brief synopsis of the new work detailing your choices and the reasons behind them.

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*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*

3. Stoppard reveals the outcome of his play in the title that reads like a headline: *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern are Dead*. Of course, readers of *Hamlet* already know what happens to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Think about the titles of other books and plays you have read. How often are they complete sentences? How many of them are one-word titles? Which makes for a better title, subjects or verbs? Is it better to name the protagonist in the title or the action of the plot?

Based on your own experience as a reader, how important is the title of a literary text? How much should it reveal about the plot? Imagine you have written your autobiography. Write a list of five titles that include a subject and a verb. Then write some one-word titles.

4. A blurb is the paragraph that describes the book one is about to read. The blurb for *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern are Dead* informs potential readers that the play made Tom Stoppard famous. It compares the book to Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. The blurb also hints at both the comedic and tragic elements of the text and connects it to its source material, *Hamlet*.

A blurb should intrigue the reader, but not spoil the read by revealing too much. Write a blurb for the dust jacket that accompanies the story of your life. With what literary work would it compare?

Publishers select the best lines from the best reviews of a book to boast on the dust jacket. Write an emphatic, glowing three-line review of your autobiography.

5. The invisible forces of fate oppose Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. This opposition creates conflict, and conflict is essential to moving the play forward. As you read the play, keep in mind that fate, rather than a flesh and blood enemy, will prove to be the duo's ultimate antagonist.

In the story that is your life, what is your invisible antagonist? Do you battle time, body weight, laziness, procrastination, bad luck? Write a dialogue between you and the force that opposes you. Begin with the phrase, "You are the ruin of my existence because..."



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*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*

## **Act One**

6. The play opens on Rosencrantz and Guildenstern betting on a coin toss. Guildenstern loses repeatedly, as Rosencrantz always calls heads. Guildenstern displays his nervousness as he mutters about the laws of probability. These characters obviously feel confused about who they are and what they are doing. In a futile attempt to comprehend what is happening, Guildenstern asks Rosencrantz to tell him the first thing he remembers. Rosencrantz replies that he cannot remember, because “it was so long ago.” Thus, Stoppard highlights the fact that much of one’s sense of self comes from one’s memories.

Free write about your earliest memory. What role does it play in your identity? Separate the memories suggested to you by relatives and friends or family photos from events you clearly remember.

7. While Rosencrantz mulls over mundane matters, perpetually growing fingernails and non-growing toenails, Guildenstern turns out to be a philosopher. Philosophy is the critical study of a basic belief and its foundation, and to philosophize is to expound upon a philosophy or system of belief. Guildenstern philosophizes about the nature of illusion, probability, and reality. He seems, however, to do this to no effect. His musings do not lead to answers for him and his pal Rosencrantz.

Drawing on your own life experience, write an essay in which you philosophize about the nature of education. Can one receive an education only in a classroom? What is the purpose of getting an education? In what way is education necessary for a happy life? What constitutes a good education?

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*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*

8. Ros and Guil finally assemble enough pieces of their puzzling existence to establish that the king has summoned them. “It was urgent—a matter of extreme urgency, a royal summons, his very words: official business and no questions asked...”

Suppose the President of the U.S. summons you on an undisclosed matter. How would you respond? Write a journal entry detailing the preparations you would make.

9. Twice, Guildenstern uses a syllogism in an attempt to understand what is happening concerning the unlikely coin toss and the royal summons. A syllogism is a system of argument that employs a major and a minor premise, and a logical conclusion based on the veracity of those premises. For example: All humans will eventually die (major premise). You are a human (minor premise). Therefore, you will eventually die (conclusion). Construct your own syllogism to support your beliefs about a topic relevant to the themes of *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern are Dead*.
10. When the Player proffers his troupe for a private pornographic performance, Guildenstern, already nervous about his plight, loses his temper. Stoppard writes in the stage directions, “GUIL smashes the PLAYER across the face. The PLAYER recoils. GUIL stands trembling...” Stoppard further describes Guil as “shaking with rage and fright.”

Write a letter of apology to a friend to whom you have revealed a darker aspect of your character, such as anger, fear, resentment, or jealousy. Recount the event that triggered the negative emotion or behavior.

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*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*

11. At Elsinore, Guildenstern and Rosencrantz are uncomfortably aware that they are merely pawns, but they do not know who decides the next move. They want to decide what is wrong with Hamlet, as Claudius has requested, collect their reward, and go home. However, they feel as if they must remain where they are and await further instructions, so as not to exacerbate the confusion. Meanwhile, they mark time by playing a game of questions.

Team up with a classmate, and write your own game of wits in which you communicate only in questions. Remember, the game has no object other than to introduce new questions. Avoid statements, rhetoric, and repetition.

12. King Claudius reunites Rosencrantz and Guildenstern with their old school chum, his nephew, Hamlet. Hamlet welcomes them warmly, although he suspects they are there to do his uncle's bidding. Write Hamlet's diary entry about the meeting.
13. "This made for a kind of harmony and a kind of confidence. It related the fortuitous and the ordained into a reassuring union which we recognized as nature. The sun came up about as often as it went down, in the long run, and a coin showed heads about as often as it showed tails. Then a messenger arrived. We had been sent for. Nothing else happened. Ninety-two coins spun consecutively have come down heads ninety-two consecutive times...and for the last three minutes on the wind of a windless day I have heard the sound of drums and flute...."

Write a free-verse poem based on the above passage of Guildenstern's dialogue from the play. Employ metaphor, imagery, and sound.

14. Guildenstern uses the sighting of a unicorn to illustrate the nature of illusion. A unicorn, mystical when it appears to one, becomes a horse with an arrow in its head when seen by many.

Examine Guil's premise that illusion ceases to be mystical when it becomes the common experience. Drawing on experiences from your own life, write a short, short story about the magical morphing into the mundane.

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*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*

15. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern have no idea what will be required of them once they arrive at their destination. They finally remember that the king summoned them, but they do not know why. They berate the fact that they feel abandoned without further instruction; yet, they continue on a mission with no clue as to its purpose.

Remember a time in your life when you did something simply because someone told you to do it. Free write about the experience.

16. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern can barely remember their own names, much less their childhoods. This confusion contributes to the chaos that occurs throughout the play. If they could remember the children they used to be, they would be on the path to forming a firm sense of identity; but Stoppard does not want that. He wants them to be more than they were in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, but still very vague and malleable.

How well do you remember your childhood? What would the child you used to be think of the person you've become? Write a letter to the child you used to be, explaining who you have become. Warn the child about obstacles you wish you had avoided. Encourage the child in ways you wish you had been encouraged.

17. Despite all of the philosophizing and forays into scientific thought, Ros and Guil are not men who are asking themselves, "What is my purpose in life?" They are merely characters asking themselves, "What is my motivation; where is my direction?"

Write a paragraph either supporting or refuting the accuracy of the statement above. Revisit this prompt when you have finished your close reading of *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern are Dead*. How has your opinion changed, or been reinforced?

## **Act Two**

18. Stoppard's play, and Shakespeare's before him, imprisons Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. They must fulfill the playwright's purpose, and they are unable to summon their own will, much less act upon it.

Focus on a time or event in your life during which you were paralyzed, unable to act of your own volition. Perhaps the cause was external, physical. Perhaps it was mental. Write a magazine article detailing the cause and resolution of the inertia.

19. Obviously, Hamlet is suffering from depression. No doubt, his uncle's ascension to the throne through nefarious means triggers this condition. Meanwhile, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern suffer from a lack of personal identity and angst over their purposes in life. Ophelia is going mad because she cannot reach Hamlet emotionally. Hamlet's mother seems clueless in the face of the glaringly obvious. The Player cannot seem to tell the difference between illusion and reality.

How do you think experts would resolve these issues today? Imagine you are an advice columnist. Write a column offering some solutions for one character's set of specific ills. As an alternative, write a letter to an advice columnist explaining your problems.

20. Critics have described the character of Rosencrantz as an idiot savant. Moments of pure genius pierce his childlike naïveté; flashes of brilliant insight occasionally light up his intellectual sluggishness. In one such moment, Rosencrantz muses that since he cannot remember what should have been a shattering revelation, that everybody dies, he must have been "born with an intuition of mortality."

Think back to the time you first realized death existed. Perhaps the knowledge came suddenly with the death of a pet or a loved one. Perhaps the idea of death dawned on you gradually from peripheral sources. Drawing on your experience, write a narrative essay detailing a child's realization of mortality.

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*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*

21. Rosencrantz refers to Hamlet as “stark, raving sane.” Why is this phrase funny? How is this phrase ironic? Create an ironic expression of your own.
22. Like Shakespeare before him, Stoppard has created memorable prose. Even his characters’ glib one-liners give one pause for thought. For example, the Player claims that trust is the currency of living.

Drawing on your own experience, write an explanatory paragraph in which you interpret this phrase. Come up with three clever metaphors, and explain them.

23. Guildenstern and Rosencrantz grow weary of watching the comings and goings of Elsinore’s inhabitants. They decide to stop Hamlet in his tracks by holding their belts taut across his path. To that end, Guil removes his belt; Ros follows suit, but his pants slide down. He cannot pull them up again until their plan plays out.

Think about the most embarrassing thing that ever happened to you or someone you know. Write a humorous essay with this thesis: Though embarrassment is a universal emotion, it is, nonetheless, hilarious.

24. Guildenstern seeks the security that comes from knowledge of what is going on and why. He needs someone to explain what is happening. Rosencrantz, on the other hand, seeks the security that comes from following orders. He needs someone to tell him what to do. Therefore, Rosencrantz accompanies Guildenstern on his quest to discover just what, in the name of Hamlet, is going on; and in return Guildenstern alternately bosses him around and reassures him.

Write a paragraph contrasting two people you know who differ in this or some other fundamental way.

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*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*

25. Like Rosencrantz, the Player does what others tell him to do, but he does it for his own interests. Like Guildenstern, he is intelligent and quick-witted. Unlike either, however, he allows self-preservation to dictate his actions. In that vein, he seems to have made himself into a character, but unlike Ros and Guil, he accepts this. He believes that life is like a play that is already written, right down to the death scene.

In what ways are you like the Player? In what ways is he a sympathetic character? What thoughts about fate and destiny does the Player's rhetoric trigger? Imagine that the Player confronts you with his fatalistic ideas. Drawing on your own experience, write a response supporting or denying the active role of destiny in a person's life.

26. Stoppard's stage directions include concise descriptions of setting. He describes how the scene is lit, what type of noise is in the background, etc.

Imagine you have written a play about your life. One of the scenes takes place in your classroom or one of the rooms in your home. Write a concise, but detailed description of the room. Use all the elements necessary to bring the room to life in your mind's eye.

27. Stoppard's word choice sets an ominous tone in the following passage of dialogue. "Wheels have been set in motion, and they have their own pace, to which we are...condemned. Each move is dictated by the previous one..." In what ways are our futures determined by our pasts? Think about a serious incident in your life, or of someone you know. Write a descriptive paragraph detailing what happened.

28. Based on what you have read so far, what predictions can you make for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern? What would you warn them about if you could? How would you encourage them?

Write a horoscope for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Try to employ Shakespearean language. Give it the feel of a reading from an Elizabethan soothsayer.

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*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*

29. Stoppard believes that theatre is artificial, and that is okay. It does not need of a moral message or a feel-good happy ending. Like Oscar Wilde before him, he subscribes to the aesthetics' school of thought: Drama is art, art is beauty, and beauty is to be enjoyed for its own sake. It does not need any other purpose.

Focus on your feelings about literature and drama as art. What responsibilities do artists have to society? Should they use their art as a platform for social change? Should they embed it with moral messages?

30. Events in the Tragedians' performance of *The Murder of Gonzago* clearly foreshadow what will befall Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, as well as the other players in *Hamlet*. In fact, Claudius becomes incensed when he sees himself in the Player King, and he retaliates by sending Hamlet to England. Why, then, can Ros and Guil not see themselves in the two spies sent to accompany a prince to his death?

Think about a time in your life when you could not see the consequences of your actions, no matter how obvious they were to others. If you could have seen what would result, how would you have acted differently? Write a confession detailing what you did and how you paid the price.

31. Throughout *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern are Dead*, Stoppard rarely uses imagery. At the end of Act Two, however, he does: Guildenstern describes the autumnal mood as he and Rosencrantz are about to depart for England, "Brown is creeping up on us...Russets and tangerine shades of old gold flushing the very outside edge of the senses...deep shining ochres, burnt umber and parchments of baked earth..." The imagery serves as metaphor for the end of the play. The action is about to commence.

Create a metaphor to describe approaching changes in your life or to describe changes you have undergone in character, feelings, or attitude. Remember, descriptive writing should be as effective at conveying an idea as it is at creating a picture.



## **Act Three**

32. *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern are Dead* provides a brilliant platform for Stoppard's clever wordplay. The interchange between the characters is swift, sharp, and satirical. The content ranges from the profound: "The scientific approach to the examination of phenomena is a defense against the pure emotion of fear." to the silly: "Eternity is a terrible thought. I mean, where's it going to end?" Some of it is Shakespearean: "Though this be madness, yet there is method in it." Some of it is quite sad: "Death followed by eternity...the worst of both worlds."

Assemble some of the most memorable one-liners from the play. Which ones would make good bumper stickers? Which ones would make good greeting cards? Which ones might make good motivational posters? Which do you find most amusing? Profound? Satirical?

33. One of Shakespeare's devices, which Stoppard turns into a running gag, is the identity confusion suffered by Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. The other characters treat them as if they are interchangeable. They often forget who is who themselves. They act as a unit, and people treat them as one. However, Stoppard skillfully reveals the subtle differences between the two characters.

Imagine that you must explain these differences to a classmate. Write a paragraph contrasting the two characters beginning with the following sentence:

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern's most obvious difference lies in the way...

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*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*

34. Although Stoppard never reveals how much they are paid, the king rewards Rosencrantz and Guildenstern before they depart on their journey to England. Aboard the ship, the two are questioning each other about how much the other was paid. They agree, without disclosing how much, that they each received the same amount.

Imagine your dream reward for a job well done. Write an email to a prospective employer or someone else who has commissioned you to perform a service, politely, but firmly, explaining your salary and benefit requirements.

35. Ros and Guil react differently to finding themselves on a dark ship. Ros is at first afraid, but Guil feels relieved that he does not have to decide where to go or what to do. Ros begins to explore the ship and gradually becomes more comfortable in his new surroundings. Ironically, Guil begins to see that they are not free, but trapped.

Think back to a time in your life when you moved to a new house, or in some other way found yourself in unfamiliar surroundings. How long did it take you to acclimatize yourself? Write a journal entry detailing the effects of a new environment on you.

36. Among other things, Stoppard uses his play to comment on the artificial nature of theatre. He does not want his audience to suspend its disbelief. Rather, he constantly reminds them they are watching a play. His Elizabethan characters spout modernisms and refer to contemporary experiences. The characters sometimes look out at the audience, almost seeming to address it. The audience realizes they are watching a play, which pokes fun at another play, and which employs a play within a play.

Imagine you have just seen a performance of the play. Write an intimate, first-person, review of *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern are Dead*. For a positive review, you might begin with something like, “Despite the fact that I never forgot that I was watching a play, *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern are Dead* still took me on a most rewarding journey.” For a negative review, you could use the following line: *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern are Dead* failed to transport me beyond the narrow confines of my theatre seat.

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*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*

37. Death runs rampant in *Hamlet*, thus it is an important theme in *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern are Dead*. The player says that his troupe aims for a play in which “everyone who is marked for death dies.” In Stoppard’s play, death is more than an event; it is an all-consuming idea. In a tragic/comic moment of irony, Guildenstern, unaware that his knife is a prop, goes so far as to attempt to murder the Player in order to demonstrate that death is real.

Write a thematic essay exploring death’s role in *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern are Dead*. Explore the following ideas: What is the nature of death? Is death final, or must Rosencrantz and Guildenstern relive the experience every time actors perform *Hamlet*? In what way is death merely an exit? In what ways are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern marked for death?

38. At the beginning of Act One, Stoppard informs readers that Guildenstern “is not worried about the money, but he is worried by the implications; aware but not going to panic about it – his character note.” This character note of pragmatic calm remains intact; for at the end of the play Guildenstern opines, “There must have been a moment, at the beginning, where we could have said—no. But somehow we missed it...Well, we’ll know better next time.” Then he disappears.

Describe a person you know who remains calm in the face of unsettling events. Employ very specific details and examples to bring this person to life for your readers. Support your selection with examples of this person’s calm in the face of chaos.

39. Guildenstern feels a sense of freedom on the boat, but it is a sense of freedom from something. He feels free from having to make decisions. However, he is not free to do as he wishes. His duty to King Claudius still binds him.

Drawing on your life experience, compare and contrast freedom from something (pain, responsibility, paying taxes, etc.), and the freedom to do as you wish (die with dignity, have children, find meaningful work, etc.).

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*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*

40. In the Shakespearean monarchy, based on the politics of Eighth-century England, the king could enact the death penalty at his whim. This created a situation in which it was easy for the authorities to hang an innocent party. In modern times, the inclusion of DNA evidence reveals that some innocent people have been wrongly accused and sent to their deaths. Advocates of the death penalty argue that the benefits of capital punishment outweigh the disadvantages. Those who oppose it, of course, disagree.

Write a letter to the editor of your favorite newspaper offering your opinion of the death penalty.

41. Rosencrantz often behaves like a child, with all the innocence, wonder, and ineptitude that implies. Guildenstern, on the other hand, is often cynical and quick-tempered owing to his contemplative nature. Which of Rosencrantz's traits do you find most believable, most desirable, and most deplorable? Which of Guildenstern's?

List the character traits you share with both characters. Write an explanatory paragraph about which of the characters you would most like to visit.

42. *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern are Dead* relies on starkness to make its point. The settings are practically all bare. Stoppard offers few details about the characters. In fact, we must rely on dialogue to glean what we can about their personalities. Starkness is an effective device because it frequently narrows the focus of the audience.

In the Middle Ages, folk ballads became a popular way to tell stories. They, too, relied on starkness. A folk ballad tells a short story, with a deliberate lack of details, set to music. Writers used repetition to limit the listeners' focus. Thus, a ballad is an appropriate art form with which to honor Ros & Guil. Use the information you have gleaned through your close reading of *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern are Dead* to write The Ballad of Ros & Guil.

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*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*

43. Guildenstern generally appears smarter and more mature than Rosencrantz; but Rosencrantz generally appears happier than Guil. Do you think it is more important to be happy no matter what, or do you think it is more important to understand what is going on around you at all times?

Based on an incident from your life, write a narrative essay supporting one of these statements: Knowledge is power. Ignorance is bliss. Remember to use plenty of concrete, vivid details to bring the incident to life.

44. Confronted with King Claudius' command to take Hamlet to England, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, though they feel vaguely threatened by the turn of events, do not act to save themselves. Even when they discover that the letter they are carrying to the King of England now demands their deaths, they behave as if changing the situation is beyond their scope of ability. Their collective apathy proves to be their downfall.

Imagine you are running for political office. Write a stump speech beginning with the following statement: Apathy is the enemy.

45. Is there a missed moment at the beginning, as Guil surmises, when he and Rosencrantz could have said no? In what way did they fail the king? Hamlet? Themselves?

Think back to a time you suffered a setback, or failed at something. Write an explanatory paragraph analyzing the causes for your failure; then write a paragraph identifying the effects of your failure.

46. Given the personalities of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, what other endings for the play may have been possible?

Imagine that Ros and Guil know that Hamlet is not dead at the hands of pirates, but that he has returned to Denmark after altering the letter to the king of England. Imagine that they also know that he feels no sympathy for his former friends. What happens to the two after they reach England? Write an alternate ending for the play.

## **W r a p - u p**

47. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern do not aspire to be heroes. They merely go about the business of surviving difficult, if not impossible, circumstances: They don't know who they are or what they are supposed to accomplish. They reluctantly embark on a mission for the king, and persist on that mission in the face of their own doubts.

Nevertheless, even this type of hero sacrifice themselves for a greater cause. They leave their old lives to embark on a journey full of obstacles to overcome. Theoretically, the journey results in a transformation. In what ways are Rosencrantz and Guildenstern heroes? Drawing on your own life experience, write a few paragraphs in which you redefine the word "hero." Support your definition with examples.

48. The identity confusion suffered by Ros and Guil serves the play and the author's purpose. The audience accepts it quickly and even comes to enjoy it. In what way is this ironic?

Imagine you suffer from amnesia. Describe what it feels like to have no identity. What personality changes would amnesia bring about? How would you cope with not knowing your self? What if you did not like the person people said you were?

49. One of the things that all of Stoppard's source material lacks is a sincere friendship. Stoppard has created a friendly relationship between Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern do not just depend upon each other; they genuinely feel for each other. Guil often reassures Ros, and Ros just wants to please Guil.

Now that you are familiar, as Stoppard's text allows you to be, with the characters of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, write a prequel narrating how the two met and became friends with Hamlet and each other. Use your narrative to flesh out the characters.

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*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*

50. *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern are Dead* was first performed in 1966. Theatre companies still perform it. In what ways is Stoppard's play timeless? How does he create a comedy around characters borrowed from a tragedy? What elements does he use to perpetuate humor?

If you were to write a play about your life, what universal themes would you focus on to make your play relevant for years to come? What issues would you avoid? How would you combine humor and tragedy?

51. Much of the vocabulary of *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern are Dead* sounds Shakespearean: appurtenance; assay; niggard; quietus; avuncular, petard. Since Stoppard's protagonists are Shakespearean, why do you suppose Stoppard did not write the whole play in such language?

Elizabethan poets were famous for their sonnets, Shakespeare foremost among them. Scan the text, and list as many Elizabethan words as you can find. Then write a poem, using as many of the words as you can.

52. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern simply disappear. Then Stoppard introduces Shakespeare's English Ambassador who announces their deaths. Why do you suppose Stoppard does not write their deaths?

In Elizabethan times, inscriptions on tombstones became quite literary. Here is your chance to memorialize Shakespeare's forgettable spies, Stoppard's unwitting stars. Write separate epitaphs for Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Write one in poetic verse and the other in prose, "as fits a king's remembrance."

53. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern cannot remember, much less convey, who they are and where they came from. This contributes to their collective lack of confidence in themselves and the vacant landscape surrounding them.

Imagine you are a historian. Restore the characters' human dignity by creating a faux historical account of their lives.

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*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*

54. Imagine you have a walk-on part in *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern are Dead*, and you can warn Rosencrantz and Guildenstern about their fate. How would you suggest that they avoid it? Write them a secret letter warning them, and outlining a plan of escape.
55. Watch the movie version of *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead*, made in 1990 and directed by Tom Stoppard. The movie stars Gary Oldman as Rosencrantz, Tim Roth as Guildenstern, and Richard Dreyfuss as the Player. Take notes as you watch. Note any elements in the movie that are not in the play and vice versa. Analyze why Stoppard may have made these changes. Note how the wordplay comes to life. In what ways do you think the movie is better or worse than the play, and why?



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*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*

## Test

1. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern realize a sense of foreboding when
  - A. ninety-two coins spun consecutively have landed on heads.
  - B. the players lead them to Elsinore.
  - C. Claudius instructs them to find the cause of Hamlet's strange behavior.
  - D. Hamlet does not recognize them.
2. From what work do the characters of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern originate?
  - A. *I, Claudius*
  - B. *Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*
  - C. *Othello*
  - D. *Waiting for Godot*
3. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern realize that they are only
  - A. a way for Claudius to antagonize Hamlet.
  - B. spectators; they have no control in the drama.
  - C. a way for Claudius to get rid of Hamlet.
  - D. Both A and C
4. Which of the following is not an idea explored in the play?
  - A. fate versus individual power
  - B. the nature of death
  - C. the nature of illusion
  - D. the nature of eternal love
5. The primary antagonist in the play is
  - A. Hamlet.
  - B. the court.
  - C. fate.
  - D. Claudius.

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*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*

6. *Rosencrantz & Guildenstern are Dead* is set in
  - A. the Elizabethan era.
  - B. the 1960s.
  - C. the Victorian era.
  - D. the 1970s.
7. The Tragedians perform a play called
  - A. *Hamlet*.
  - B. *Macbeth*.
  - C. *The Merchant of Venice*.
  - D. *The Murder of Gonzago*.
8. The dialogue between Rosencrantz and Guildenstern may best be described as
  - A. empty rhetoric.
  - B. witty banter.
  - C. unfathomable nonsense.
  - D. philosophical debate.
9. Which of the following critical terms does not apply to the play?
  - A. moralistic
  - B. derivative
  - C. comedic
  - D. intellectual
10. The scene settings for the play may best be described as
  - A. pivotal to the action.
  - B. elaborate and showy.
  - C. sparse to nonexistent.
  - D. numerous and ever-changing.

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*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*

11. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern engage in what can best be described as
  - A. a struggle against Hamlet.
  - B. a struggle to maintain sanity.
  - C. a struggle for validation and instructions, like actors in a play.
  - D. a struggle to save Hamlet from himself.
12. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern go to Elsinore because
  - A. they are summoned by Hamlet's uncle and his mother.
  - B. they want a "voluntary visitation" with Hamlet.
  - C. they are lured there by the Tragedians.
  - D. they are summoned by the King of England.
13. People constantly confuse Rosencrantz and Guildenstern with one another because
  - A. they look alike.
  - B. they are brothers.
  - C. they move about too quickly to get a good look at them.
  - D. they are unsure of their own identities.
14. The reader knows Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are dead because
  - A. the player predicts it.
  - B. the messenger announces their death.
  - C. Hamlet orders it.
  - D. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are too foolish to be able to survive.
15. How does the character of The Player best serve the play?
  - A. The Player reinforces the idea that everyone has a role to play; everyone is in the same situation.
  - B. The Player is the play's only dynamic character.
  - C. The Player serves as comic relief.
  - D. The Player acts as a conduit for unpopular ideas.

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*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*

16. Throughout most of the play, Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are
  - A. entertained by the players.
  - B. amused by Hamlet's antics.
  - C. waiting to be received by Claudius.
  - D. confused.
17. Who expects to be paid well by the King?
  - A. Alfred
  - B. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern
  - C. the messenger
  - D. Polonius
18. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are upset because
  - A. Hamlet does not recognize them.
  - B. they realize how painful Hamlet's situation is.
  - C. Claudius refuses to pay them.
  - D. they feel they are being used.
19. The play explores the inner world of
  - A. Hamlet's torment.
  - B. the personality of the players.
  - C. the anger of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.
  - D. the curiosity of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.
20. It is clear that Stoppard has created Rosencrantz and Guildenstern as characters who
  - A. have no desire to understand truth.
  - B. have a death wish.
  - C. are caught in their own malicious scheming.
  - D. are unable to arrive at any understanding of their situation.

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*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*

Test  
Student Answer Sheet

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

1. \_\_\_\_\_

11. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

12. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

13. \_\_\_\_\_

4. \_\_\_\_\_

14. \_\_\_\_\_

5. \_\_\_\_\_

15. \_\_\_\_\_

6. \_\_\_\_\_

16. \_\_\_\_\_

7. \_\_\_\_\_

17. \_\_\_\_\_

8. \_\_\_\_\_

18. \_\_\_\_\_

9. \_\_\_\_\_

19. \_\_\_\_\_

10. \_\_\_\_\_

20. \_\_\_\_\_

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*Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*

Test  
Answer Key

1. \_\_A\_\_

11. \_\_C\_\_

2. \_\_B\_\_

12. \_\_A\_\_

3. \_\_B\_\_

13. \_\_D\_\_

4. \_\_D\_\_

14. \_\_B\_\_

5. \_\_C\_\_

15. \_\_A\_\_

6. \_\_A\_\_

16. \_\_D\_\_

7. \_\_D\_\_

17. \_\_B\_\_

8. \_\_B\_\_

18. \_\_D\_\_

9. \_\_A\_\_

19. \_\_D\_\_

10. \_\_C\_\_

20. \_\_D\_\_

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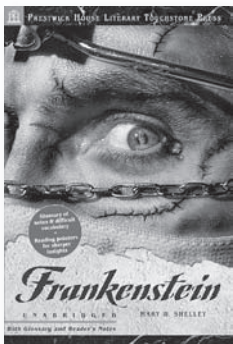
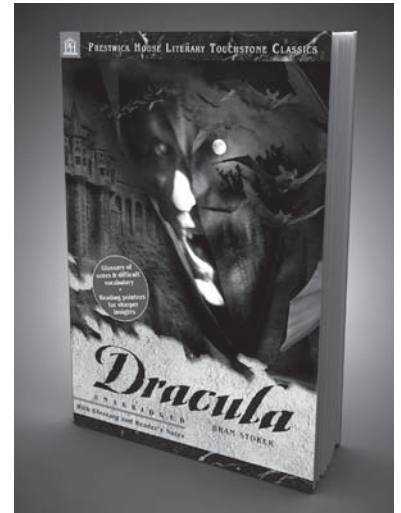
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