Before seeing/reading the play

1. What major events occurred during the reign of King John? What were his major accomplishments? What was his reputation among his subjects? What is his reputation today? These and other websites provide information:
   http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/historic_figures/john_i_king.shtml

2. Research the historical people who are referred to or appear in *King John*: Richard I, Eleanor of Aquitaine, Constance, Arthur, Blanche, Hubert de Burgh, Philip II of France, Lewis the Dauphin (aka Louis VIII). These and other websites provide information:
   http://www.womeninworldhistory.com/EofAreturns.html
   http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hubert_de_Burgh
   http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Philip_Il_of_France
   http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Louis_VIII_of_France

3. Create a family tree from King Henry II down to King John’s son, Henry III. Identify the characters listed above on your family tree.

4. What were the rules for succession in Shakespeare’s time? How did these principles differ from those of King John’s time? If a king died without a legitimate son to succeed him, what factors would determine his most likely successor? Study the family tree of the descendants of Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine. Where do Arthur and John fit into the lineage? In Shakespeare’s time, who would have had the better claim to the English
thrones? In John’s time? What other factors contributed to John’s succession? Chart the advantages and disadvantages of John’s kingship versus Arthur’s kingship. Which would you choose to rule England? This and other websites provide information: 

5. Many of us know John and his time best through the tales of Robin Hood. Reread some of these stories. How do they handle the issue of legitimacy and succession? Describe Prince John as he appears in these tales.

6. In what ways was marriage a different institution in the Middle Ages and among the nobility? Describe the function of arranged marriages. What were the advantages? The disadvantages? King John and King Phillip arrange a marriage between John’s niece Blanche and Phillip’s son Lewis. Historically, what was the purpose of this marriage? What were the advantages of this marriage for John and Phillip? What was the outcome of the union between Lewis and Blanche? Extend your research through the end of Blanche’s life.

7. During the 13th century, women throughout Europe had a unique opportunity to gain power and step into roles previously deemed inappropriate for them. What circumstances brought about this change? What new duties did women take on? What reforms did they enact? How did society change as a result of women’s influence? What part did Eleanor of Aquitaine, her daughters and granddaughters play in these events? Describe the influence wielded by the other historical women in the play, Constance and Blanche. What caused this cycle of women’s power to end?

8. What was Magna Carta? Who thought it was necessary and why? These and other websites provide information:
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Magna_Carta
http://www.bl.uk/treasures/magnacarta/magna.html

9. Define the following words: excommunication, interdict, primogeniture

10. Religion plays a major role in the events of this play. What were the major religions of England and France in the 13th century? Describe the power of the Church in the 13th century. What were the sources of its power? What was the Pope’s role in shaping
international affairs? Who were Pope Innocent and Stephen Langton? What was the contention between Pope Innocent and King John over Stephen Langton? What weapons did John have with which to combat the Church? What weapons did the Church have with which to combat John? What was the typical relationship between Church and state at that time? In Shakespeare’s time? In what ways was the relationship different? The same? These and other websites provide information:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Innocent_III

Resources:

Books:

The Lion in Winter by James Goldman
Eleanor of Aquitaine by Alison Weir
Most Wise and Valiant Ladies by Andrea Hopkins
Falls the Shadow and Prince of Darkness by Sharon Kay Penman

Learn more about Shakespeare’s life and times at the following websites:

http://internetshakespeare.uvic.ca/Library/SLT/index.html
http://www.folger.edu/template.cfm?cid=865&CFID=6230886&CFTOKEN=25420173
http://www.shakespeare.org.uk/explore-shakespeare.html
http://shakespeare.palomar.edu/life.htm
http://www.bardweb.net/man.html

After seeing/reading the play

1. Refer your research on King John and his time. What differences do you find between the historical King John and his world and the fictional character and world Shakespeare constructs in his play? What events did Shakespeare alter for his play? What did he gain by making these changes? What did he lose? How might the politics of Shakespeare’s time have influenced his perspective on the time of King John?

2. What aspects of the character of King John as depicted in the tales of Robin Hood are carried over into Shakespeare’s play? What aspects of his character differ?
3. One of the defining incidents of King John’s reign was the signing of Magna Carta. Why do you think Shakespeare didn’t include this incident in his play? Why do we, today, put more value on Magna Carta than Shakespeare did? If you were going to include it in the play, where would you insert it?

4. Study the Bastard’s speech on commodity (Act II, scene 1). Find a modern synonym for “commodity” as the Bastard uses the word. Find a modern antonym. What events lead up to his speech? How have these events shocked him? Which people have disappointed him? Which have lived up to his expectations? With whom does his sympathy lie? How have the events changed him? Working from the “commodity” speech, define the Bastard’s notions of how society works and how it ought to work. Find events and alliances in our own time that could be accurately described by the “commodity” speech.

5. Based on his actions rather than his words, what is John’s philosophy? What is the Bastard’s? King Phillip’s? The Dauphin’s? Cardinal Pandulph’s?

6. While most of the play’s characters have a basis in history, the Bastard is invented. How does he differ from the history-based figures? What ideas and attitudes does Shakespeare give him? Why is he the only character who addresses the audience directly? Customarily, Shakespeare gives the final speech of a play to the character of the highest rank, yet in King John it is the Bastard who delivers the last words. Why is that appropriate? How do you respond to the Bastard? How does that response compare with your responses to the other characters?

7. Three of the four women in the play are defined by their role as mother of a son (and Blanche, in the years following the time of the play, achieves considerable power through her son). Describe the relationships of the three mothers to their sons. What does each want for and from her son? What is each willing to do to achieve it? What does each expect to gain for herself through her son?

8. Loyalty and betrayal of loyalty run throughout the play. Chart these changing loyalties. To whom is each individual loyal? At what point and for what reason does he or she betray that loyalty? To whom does the person shift her or his loyalty? What
does each gain from the new alliance? If you had to choose, what would you consider the worthiest loyalty in the play? The vilest betrayal?

9. Why do the nobles, in the persons of Salisbury and Pembroke, object to John’s second coronation? Why are they disturbed by his submission to the Pope? What is at stake for them personally? What convinces them that they will be better off revolting from John and siding with the French? What changes their minds?

10. Hubert is loyal to King John, yet disobeys him. Describe the circumstances, the reason and the outcome. Compare Hubert with Camillo in *The Winter’s Tale* and the Nazi officer in *The Diary of Anne Frank* if you have also seen these plays. Working from these examples, define when it is virtuous to obey, when to disobey. Debate the merits and drawbacks of loyalty to a person versus loyalty to an idea or philosophy.

11. Which characters achieve power through force? Which achieve power through manipulation? By what other means do they acquire power?

12. Cardinal Pandulphe represents the power of the Church. When John defies the Pope, Pandulphe declares, “...meritorious shall that hand be called that takes away by any secret course thy hateful life.” By what authority can he call for John’s assassination? By what other means can the Church combat John’s defiance? Why would John’s rebelliousness please an Elizabethan audience? What does Pandulphe demand in exchange for lifting this curse? What do you consider the proper balance of power between Church and state? Name modern instances that parallel Pandulphe’s assertion of the Church’s power over the state.

13. In a play about politics, love is perhaps an odd player, yet love is constantly spoken of, if not always acted on. Find the references to love. In each case, provide a synonym that conveys what the speaker *really* means. What does he or she hope to accomplish by using the word in that context? In which instances does the speaker mean what you think of as love?

14. Why do Blanche and Lewis play along with the game that they are in love, even though their marriage is clearly a political move?
15. Who is the legendary King Arthur? With what elements of his myth does Constance hope to associate her son by naming him Arthur? The historical Arthur was sixteen, nearly a grown man, at his death, yet Shakespeare writes him as a child some five or six years younger. What is gained by this? How might it change the story if Arthur were older?

16. What options does Constance, as a widow, have for keeping her son safe and securing his legacy? What choices does she make? What weapons are at her disposal?

17. For King John, what are the advantages of keeping Arthur alive? The disadvantages? Outline his reasoning, step by step, leading to the conclusion that the boy must die. Outline a similar process by which he might conclude that he would be better off with Arthur alive and well.

18. What do the Bastard and Lewis the Dauphin have in common when we first meet them? How do they differ? How do they change in the course of the play? What engages their sympathy? Who are their teachers? What is the journey of each through the issues of loyalty, love, honor and self-knowledge?

19. Describe the qualities of good ruler. In most of the history plays, Shakespeare deals with the tension between the right to rule (refer to your research on the rules of succession) and the ability to rule well. What conflict results when the reigning monarch lacks one of these two qualities? How does John measure up? Phillip? Lewis the Dauphin? Arthur? Eleanor? The Bastard?

20. King John dies of a fever. Scholars have observed that he is spiritually and emotionally feverish through the play. Find instances of his feverish behavior. How does his “fever” influence his actions?

21. The two most innocent and vulnerable characters are Arthur and Blanche. What does each symbolize? How is each used, and by whom? What are the strengths of each? The weaknesses? What is the outcome for each?

22. This production draws on elements of World War I. How do they resonate with King John’s time? With Shakespeare’s time? With our own time? How did these elements enhance the production for you? How did they detract from it?
23. The most frequent form of imagery in the play is personification; that is, a literary form in which an inanimate object, an abstract concept or a non-human living creature is represented as if it were alive and endowed with human qualities and abilities. For example: “France is a bawd to Fortune and King John, that strumpet Fortune,” (Act III, scene iv). Find other instances in the play. What effect do you think Shakespeare was trying to achieve by attributing human capacities to non-human entities?

24. King John himself is frequently pictured as a body part rather than as a whole person. For example: “...the foot / That leaves the print of blood where’er it walks” (Act IV, scene iii). What effect do you think Shakespeare was trying to achieve by presenting his title character as a fragment of humanity? How does this imagery influence your response to John? How does this imagery help to define the world of the play?

25. Find parallels between the characters and modern political figures. Which people do you admire? Which not as much? Why?

26. Having seen the play, speculate about why it is less popular than Shakespeare’s other history plays. What features (incidents, characters, themes, attitudes) are likable? Which are less likable?

27. Shakespeare wrote three other characters identified as bastards: Dunois in *Henry VI, Part One*, Don John in *Much Ado About Nothing* and Edmund in *King Lear*. If you are familiar with any of these plays, contrast his treatment of them with his treatment of Faulconbridge in *King John*. 

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