

# What Is Subtext?

*From Spacious Acting*

Subtext is what your character isn't saying. Not in words, anyway.

The playwright provides you with dialogue. The dialogue is the text. It's what we are willing to have other people hear. Sometimes we tell the truth when we talk. Sometimes we deliberately lie (or fudge the edges). Sometimes we tell what we think is the truth even though it isn't. We aren't ready to face the truth yet, and so we're lying to ourselves as well as to everyone else.

You don't have to "play" the text. The words do that quite nicely without much help from you. Playing the text is sort of like a fourth grader pointing out where the moon is when he sings about it, and holding his hand over his heart when he sings about love. It's unnecessary "sign language".

What an actor brings to the play is what's going on INSIDE the character, the stuff he doesn't say out loud. The playwright provides clues to that, which are often subtle. It's up to you to identify and highlight them for the audience, and to do so not just when those verbal clues arise in the script, but throughout the scene.

In other words, if you get an inkling halfway through a scene that your character is in love with the other person in the scene, you don't just start giving evidence of that on the line that makes you understand that fact. You didn't just start to fall in love when the revealing words come out of your mouth. You've been in love with the other character from the beginning of the scene, in all likelihood. It is part of the subtext of the scene that will color everything that you say and do.

So how do we find the subtext?

Subtext is both emotions and need: the stuff you carry into the scene and what you're trying to get out of it. Your needs are expressed in the verbs you choose. Your emotions, along with your general nature (your personality and history) help to determine how you go about filling your needs; that is, how you pursue your verbs.

Ask yourself why you say each of your lines. If you don't know the answer, read a bit more carefully. They aren't just words on the page; they are pieces of information that, put together, create a life. Read them to make sense of the insensible.

But don't settle for the easy answers to the questions, answers that just rephrase the line you're working with.

For instance, if an actor has a line that is a question – "What did you mean by that?" – and I ask why he says it, he might tell me, "Because I want to know what she means." Well, of course – but WHY does he want to know what she means? Will he be insulted if she means A, or hurt if she means B? Or is he simply confused by what she's said – does it seem to him that she is talking about something entirely different than what he thought they were talking about? And does that worry him?

Look for what we can call the "secondary why", which has to do with the subtext of the line, and now you are moving closer to understanding what is going on with your character. Notice that in the examples above, what I am finding is emotional. I've given you an example that is out of context intentionally, so you can see the link to the emotions: insulted, hurt, worried.

Remember, it's okay to spot the emotion in a scene, as long as you don't stop there. Don't try to play the emotion, but instead just let it inform the scene by influencing how you go about pursuing your verb. Your emotional state is part of what is called the given circumstances of the scene. The given circumstances are all the things that have led you to this moment in time ("given", because the playwright has chosen them). Understand them and play your verbs, and any new emotions that arise in the scene will take care of themselves.

Now let's put a question in context and get both the emotions and the verbs. Let's say you ask your "husband" in the play, "How are you today?" Yes, you want to know how he is. But you have a deeper reason for asking it. He had a migraine headache last night – you're hoping it is gone, because you hate to see him in pain. Or you're hoping it is gone, because you're hosting a dinner party tonight, and if he has a headache, it will be a difficult night.

In the first case, you are feeling love and concern for his well-being. Your verb might be "to take care of him." In the second case, you might be worried and just a little overwhelmed. Your verb might be "to have a successful party."

Or perhaps you had a fight last night, and you're testing the waters, to find out if he's still mad at you. Or perhaps you want to ask him a favor, to let your parents stay with you for two weeks when they visit next month. He's not fond of your father, so you want to make sure he's in a good mood when you ask him.

In the first case, you might be uncertain and hopeful, and your verb is "to reconcile with him." In the second case, you might be feeling anxious and needy, and your verb is "to convince him to let your parents visit." (Maybe I have that wrong – maybe you're uncertain and needy, and anxious and hopeful!)

All of these possibilities are the subtext, the meaning that lies underneath the very simple words, "How are you today?" Read the script over and over again until you find the meaning that is hiding between the lines.

## Using Subtext to Underscore a Scene

Sometimes the text and the subtext are in perfect alignment, and what you say should be taken at face value. Sometimes "How are you today?" has no hidden meaning behind it. It's just something we say in greeting one another.

But they often aren't aligned. Sometimes we say one thing and mean another. Sometimes we feel one thing but pretend we don't. Your job, as an actor, is to figure out when there is something hidden, as well as when there isn't.

Who among us, in our real lives, says everything we think? How often are we truly honest about what we feel? And even if we are, how much of what we say is about what we feel?

Very little. We talk for other reasons. To gain information, to persuade, to explain, to think through, to debate, to wonder, to entertain, etc.

A single scene in a play may have multiple beats representing Small Verbs (tactics) you use to pursue the Medium Verb that covers the entire scene. Occasionally, you'll get more than one Medium Verb in a lengthy scene. (Your Big Verb for the entire play will remain consistent throughout, however.)

I said that your subtext is both emotions and needs (verbs). The needs aren't the Small Verbs, which are simply how you go about getting what it is you want. Needs are the bigger verbs, both the Big Verb that governs the entire play, and the Medium Verbs that govern scenes. Added to those needs are any of the emotions that you may be feeling. That's your subtext.

Any time what you say and do is not perfectly matched with what you feel or what you want, you're dealing with subtext. If you are in touch with those hidden elements, the audience will sense them. Your given circumstances provide the subtext at the start of the scene, but new information or events can provoke new but unspoken emotions in you that you didn't have when the scene began, changing or adding to your subtext.

The subtext will typically cover more just the single lines I used as examples in the last post – it will cover one or more beats.

For instance, if I want you to do me a favor, I may not come right out and ask for it. I need the favor, but I'm afraid it's something you won't want to do, and I feel badly about asking for it. So perhaps I ask you a few questions first, because I want to figure out if it's really going to be inconvenient for you to do the favor for me. Perhaps it means driving out of your way, and I want to be sure you have a car in good working condition, and the time to do it in between picking up the dry cleaning and getting your hair cut.

These aren't idle questions; they are directly related to the matter of asking you to take care of four 8-year-old girls who are having a tea party as their playdate. How I ask the questions is going to be different than it would be if I was just curious about what you are doing on Friday. If you start telling me you're getting your hair and nails done because of a special event you're going to that evening, I may start feeling guilty about the fact that I'm going to ask you to do me this favor on what is probably a full day for you. And when you change the subject, I'm going to have to figure out a way to get back to the topic of just what your schedule looks like, so I can determine whether or not I'm going to ask you to do me the favor or find someone else to do it.

I may offer information about my own scheduling problems – the doctor appointment that suddenly became available on Friday, so I don't have to wait until next week to find out what this strange lump in my body is. I may share with you my worry that I have the same cancer that killed my mother. Now I'm giving you a reason to want to help me when I finally get around to asking you the favor.

In other words, on my side of the conversation, it's ALL about asking you a favor. THAT'S the subtext of the whole thing. I don't ask the favor until the end of the second page, but those two pages are all about asking you a favor.

But again – don't make the mistake of trying to play the emotional subtext. Playing emotions for their own sake doesn't work, whether you're dealing with text or subtext. It's too heavy-handed and not grounded in real desire.

This is where the verbs come into play. They allow you to play the subtext, which includes your emotional state (an altogether different thing from the emotions that may flicker through you during the scene), with subtlety. I'm not playing guilt, need, fear, envy. I don't have to figure out which line is the line to show my guilt on, which line to show my fear on. I just understand my circumstances: I am scared that I have a cancerous tumor, and need to visit the doctor on Friday to calm my fears. My daughter has been planning the tea party for three weeks, and the mothers of the other girls are counting on having the afternoon free and have already made other plans that take them out of town. You've got your own life and your husband is being honored by the Kiwanis Club tonight, and I feel guilty about asking for valuable time to do something that is bound to be stressful. But I really need this favor, and I've asked three other people, all of whom have turned me down. I really need my friend's help.

If I understand my circumstances fully, then all I have to do is concentrate on playing my verb – getting you to do me this favor – and everything else, including my emotional life, is largely going to take care of itself in all the right ways.