

SUBTEXT

'... there's nothing there except lines of dialogue. If they're sketched correctly and minimally, they will give the audience the illusion that these are 'real people,' especially if the lines are spoken by real people -- the actors are going to fill a lot in.'

-- David Mamet

SUBTEXT IS.....

the unspoken thoughts and motives of your characters -- what they really think and believe.

And what you leave a lot out of in the dialogue is Subtext. Pushing this just beneath the surface of the dialogue is what makes plays exciting and helps keep audiences in their seats.

In well-written dialogue, Subtext seldom breaks through the surface of the dialogue except in moments of extreme Conflict. At other times, it colors the dialogue. Another way of looking at this . . .

Subtext is *Content Underneath The Spoken Dialogue*

**subtext gives the performers something to do. If you let your characters tell each other everything they think or feel, actors can't do what they're trained to do best: revealing through gesture, intonation, and expression, the real essence of a character.

EXAMPLE #1

Here's a graphic depiction of Subtext in relation to spoken dialogue. Subtext is what the characters are really thinking or feeling, but don't say.

Him and Her from ANNIE HALL by Woody Allen

Subtext is in boldface italic below each line of dialogue. . .

(A party. Her and Him look out over the apartment balcony. They're six feet apart trying desperately not to notice each other.)

HER

Hi!

Oh, God, nobody cool says Hi.

HIM

Hello!

I'd love to take her out. I hope my deodorant's working.

HER

Nice view.

He's talking to me! And he'll hate my silly dress.

HIM

(Taking a furtive step toward her)

Just look at the clouds over there.

I've got to find out who she is.

HER

I'm Leslie . . .

What a stupid name. He'll hate it and hate me.

HIM

Neat dress.

I just love her name.

EXAMPLE #2

In the opening lines of Marsha Norman's play, tremendous subtext lurks just beneath the surface of the dialogue as Mama's 40-ish daughter, Jessie, asks a seemingly innocuous question. But under that question is 40 years of emotional baggage about to come home . .

Jessie's first line is a seemingly innocuous question to her mother:

"Does she have any old towels she doesn't want? "

It's an odd request. But we have to spend 8 more pages with her before we understand how ominous it really is. And that's because Jessie's Subtext is kept beneath the surface of the dialogue.

This is what would happen if Jessie spoke all of her Subtext . . .

JESSIE

(As Marsha Norman would never
write dialogue)

Do we have any old towels, plastic sheeting or foam rubber padding? I'm going to commit suicide in the bedroom tonight with Daddy's pistol as soon as I get everything done for you and I need the towels so all the blood won't make a mess on your floor.