TECHNICA
EDITORIAL SERVICES

What's Really Being Said?

Dialogue & Subtext Cheat Sheet

Use this quick guide to strengthen your dialogue, add layers to your scenes, and make sure your characters are saying more than the words on the page.



Use this to spot opportunities for stronger subtext in your scenes.

		Yes	Not Yet
1	**My characters don't always say exactly what they mean.** The space between the words and the real meaning.	☐	☐
2	**The dialogue sounds natural.** It reflects how people actually talk, including hesitation, avoidance, or changed subjects.	☐	☐
3	**Subtext is supported by context.** Readers have enough information to understand what's underneath the words.	☐	☐
4	**I use more than words to convey meaning.** Body language, actions, silence, and setting add to the conversation.	☐	☐
5	**My characters have their own agendas.** They may want different things, even in the conversation.	☐	☐
6	**There are moments of tension, conflict, or emotional stakes.** Even in quiet scenes, something is at risk.	☐	☐
7	**I'm not repeating information.** The dialogue and narration aren't saying the same thing in the same way.	☐	☐
8	**There are unanswered questions.** Readers are left with curiosity about what comes next.	☐	☐
9	**Each character has a distinct voice.** Their word choices, rhythm, and perspective feel unique.	☐	☐
10	**The scene reveals something important.** The conversation deepens our understanding of the characters or relationship.	☐	☐

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NOW WHAT?

SIX WAYS TO ADD SUBTEXT

Use these strategies to turn good dialogue into great scenes!

1	**Let Characters Want Different Things** *Tension creates subtext. Give each character their own agenda, even in what might seem like a friendly conversation.*	**Instead of...** **"Are you coming to the meeting?"** **"Yes, I'll be there."**	**Try This...** *"Are you coming to the meeting?"* *"I'll try."* *(Reader question: What's getting in the way?)*
2	**Use What Isn't Said** *Silence, avoidance, and changed subjects can speak volumes.*	**Instead of...** **"I'm angry because you lied to me."**	**Try This...** *She folded the towel once, then again. "Six months."* *(Let the reader feel it!)*
3	**Show Through Action and Body Language** *Small gestures can reveal big emotions.*	**Instead of...** **"I was nervous."**	**Try This...** *She rubbed her palms on her jeans and couldn't meet his eyes.* *(Let the action carry the emotion.)*

☑ QUICK SCENE CHECK

As you work through your scenes, ask Yourself:

- ☐ ***What does each character WANT in this scene?***
- ☐ ***What is NOT being said?***
- ☐ ***Is there tension, even if it's quiet?***
- ☐ ***Have I shown enough for readers to understand the subtext?***
- ☐ ***Am I trusting readers to make connections?***

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4

Layer Your Dialogue

Let the words mean one thing on the surface, and something else underneath.

Instead of...

"You're home early. I'm upset you're here."

Try This...

"You're home early."

(Let the reader wonder: Is it a relief? Suspicion? Hurt? Let the context reveal meaning.)

5

Avoid the "Double Tell"

If dialogue says it, don't repeat it in the narration.

Instead of...

"I don't want you to go," she said, feeling afraid he would leave.

Try This...

"I don't want you to go."

(Let the line and the moment do the emotional work.)

6

Give Readers Enough Context

Subtext works well when readers have the clues to understand what's underneath the words.

Instead of...

A character suddenly acts cold with no explanation.

Try This...

Show the history, stakes, or recent event that helps readers understand the shift.



A FINAL NOTE

You don't have to make your writing mysterious. You just have to trust your readers enough to give them something to discover. Let them work for the payoff!

When characters don't say everything, the story feels more real, and the emotions feel deeper.