

How to Write Dialogue With Subtext

By Holly Lisle

Dialogue and Subtext: Episode One

Let's start with the misconceptions people have about subtext in dialogue. There are a lot of them.

- People think that subtext in dialogue is complex, mystical, indefinable thing (frequently they think this because writers told them this and it's not the case).
- People think that subtext in dialogue is something that only advanced writers should tackle (again, this is one of those 'leave it to the experts' thing that is not true).
- People think that subtext in dialogue is very hard to write.
- And people think that subtext in dialogue is something that only *very* clever readers will even get. So why bother?

The truth is far different. Subtext in dialogue is simple, straightforward and it has a clear, brief definition. Subtext in dialogue is something *even absolute beginners can master*.

Subtext in dialogue is very easy to write – *if* you think first. Thinking is critical. You have to know and you have to plan your subtext.

Subtext in dialogue is something even a middle school kid reading kid-fiction instantly gets.

So let's go take a look at the definitions and taking it all apart and then putting it all together and finally writing

some subtext.

Ready? Let's go.

Dialogue and Subtext

Let's start with the quick and dirty definitions of dialogue and subtext.

First, let's give you the definition of dialogue: Dialogue is just people talking to each other.

However, very important, dialogue in fiction is NOT regular dialogue. **Dialogue in fiction is people communicating conflict to each other in a manner that sounds natural, that heightens story tension and that moves the plot forward.** This is why in *good* writing you do not see people just standing, leaning on a fence post, talking about the weather, talking about what they saw on TV last night, talking about what they had for dinner, talking about the recipe that didn't work out – with none of it going anywhere.

Dialogue in fiction, one more time, is people communicating conflict to each other – the writer's planned conflict – in a manner that sounds natural, that heightens story tension and that moves the plot forward. Okay?

Subtext is the conflict and the contradictions between what real people or fictional characters do, think or say. Subtext is not some deep, mystical, magical thing. It is, very simply, the conflict and the contradictions – conflict, contradictions, the places where things don't match up – between what your characters do, what your characters think and what your characters say.

To get subtext, let's start with dialogue and with what people do.

Okay, you are going to be looking at protagonists, antagonists, and just background characters. In every case

when they speak to each other all your dialogue starts with action or with a plan of action.

So, to get your plan of action, to understand what kind of dialogue your characters are going to engage in, you start with, first, the kind of characters they are.

We have **good guys**, **bad guys** and **fence sitters**.

Okay, the **good guys**, will save the cat, stay faithful, take good chances, help people who need help. They will create, dream and love. C, D and L. They will encourage others to succeed, they will take care of themselves – they will be in other words independent and they will pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. They will take care of their loved ones. They will stand up for people who matter. They will put themselves at risk for people who matter to them.

They will have CDL principles. This is **Create, Dream** and **Love** principles. This is: they will make intelligent, objective choices that stand up to their values, to what *they* value, to creation, to living up to their dreams, and to the love they have for the people around them and for themselves. And they will make their choices based on these principles. They will have CDL values, they will have CDL morals and they will make CDL choices.

The **bad guys**. The bad guys will kick the cat – or worse. They will cheat, they will take bad chances, bad risks, they will use people who need help, they will take advantage of them, they will destroy, excuse and hate. D, E and H. They will discourage others from success, thinking that it impedes their own success or that by standing on other people's head they can succeed better. They will steal from others, they will destroy loved ones, they will abandon and betray people who matter.

They will have DEH principles. **Destroy, Excuse** and **Hate**. That is: they will take actions and make choices based upon

what they can destroy, what they can make excuses for, or about, and what they can hate. They will have DEH values, they will have DEH morals, and they will make DEH choices.

Most books have *just* good guys and *just* bad guys. But there is a third category of characters called the **fence sitters**.

These are the folks who will not leap into save the cat, they will not actively attempt to hurt the cat. But they will watch the cat drown. They will not stay faithful and love their partner, they will not cheat on their partner – what they will do instead is they will punish their partner for remaining with them by making their partner miserable. They will not help people who need help, they will not take good chances, they will not take bad chances. They simply passively wait for things to happen and live a life of accident in that the only things that they will ever do are things that fall on their heads. They will not help people that need help, neither will they use people that need help, they will simply ignore people who need help.

Their values are **Evade/Envy**, **Bury** and **Fear**. They envy success and badmouth the successful. They will not encourage people to succeed, they will not discourage people from succeeding, they will simply envy and badmouth those who do. They will not take care of themselves, neither will they steal from others. They will instead sit with their hands out expecting entitlements, expecting handouts, expecting to be saved. They will not stand up for the people that matter to them, neither will they abandon and betray people that matter to them. They will simple ignore the people who matter to them.

They will have EBF principles. Evade (and sometimes Envy), Bury – pretend that they don't see it, pretend that it's not there – and Fear. They will make choices based on that which they do not wish to see, that which they wish to hide so that other people will not know that was what they did or said or thought. And what they fear. They will have EBF values, they

will have EBF morals, and they will have EBF choices.

And you can use all three of these kinds of characters in your fiction. *And your fiction will be deeper if you do.* If you have good guys, if you have bad guys and if you have fence sitters.

(continued in the class)

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