

Acting: Understanding Subtext

It's essential that actors understand subtext, including what it is, how it works and how to identify and analyze it. Here is an exercise designed to do just that.

You may download the exercise [here](#).

What is Subtext?

Subtext is found in modern plays that use realistic dialogue. The idea of subtext is based on modern psychology that often looks for a deeper meaning in things we say. As an example, if someone longingly says, "What a beautiful sunset!" the subtext might be, "I wish my life was filled with these" or "I want this moment to last forever."

Subtext is an important tool that playwrights use frequently as it enriches a play on numerous levels, making for more complex characters, more twists and turns in the plot, and more interesting dialogue.

Identifying Subtext

Here are some steps that play readers, actors and others can use in discovering and analyzing subtext.

Homework

1. Read the play thoroughly (Note: Parts may be assigned before this first step, which allows students to focus on their character. You may need to assign various students to each part to ensure each has the opportunity to read.)
2. After reading the play, determine what each character wants. This is their "objective," which is the goal they are pursuing.
3. Write down each character's objective in one sentence. Make it active. As in, Joe wants to be loved; Sally wants to be in charge; Nancy wants to be safe from danger.
4. Find at least five examples of subtext. (Note: Assign various pages to specific students. The pages should include the part they are reading.)
5. Read the lines aloud many times attempting to bring the subtext to the surface.

In Class

1. Read the play aloud in relatively short segments. Half a page or a page at a time.
2. Note where students have made choices regarding subtext and discuss how they read the line.
3. Identify subtext that was not interpreted and discuss the line's surface and underlying meaning. Be open to discussing various choices regarding the subtext. Agree on an interpretation.

4. Then have the line read in an attempt to illuminate the subtext.
5. Discuss the new reading and how it worked.
6. Be selective in this process as it can extend greatly the amount of time it takes to read a play.

Exercise Contributed by Paul Mroczka

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