



## PROTOTYPING SERVICE PROCESSES AND EXPERIENCES

## SUBTEXT

Subtext is a theatrical method that can reveal deeper motivations and needs by focusing on unspoken thoughts in a rehearsal session.

<b>Duration</b>	5 to 30 minutes, as a deepening segment of a rehearsal session
<b>Physical requirements</b>	A flexible, private space, furniture, whatever objects are at hand, a flipchart, a starting point
<b>Energy level</b>	High
<b>Researchers/Facilitators</b>	1 or more
<b>Participants</b>	4+ (as part of the rehearsal session)
<b>Research techniques</b>	Use-it-yourself (autoethnography), participant observation, co-creative workshops
<b>Expected output</b>	Research data (specifically documentation of the subtext chains, new insights and ideas), raw video footage and photos, more questions and hypotheses.

Subtext is a theatrical concept which can enrich a rehearsal and give deeper insight and inspiration. The term has several interlocking meanings in theater, but we can think of subtext as the unspoken thoughts of a character, which might be implied by her actions. **Put another way, subtext is what we mean, but don't say.** Bringing subtext into an investigative rehearsal can reveal deeper motivations, help us understand needs, and illuminate many new opportunities to create value.<sup>01</sup>

In theater rehearsal, subtext is usually only talked about as part of an actor's "notes" or in initial readings of the play. But there are some rehearsal techniques and games (and even a few plays) where subtext is made audible so it can inspire new understanding and directions. In service design, we mostly use rolling subtext and subtext chains.

<sup>01</sup> See Moore, S. (1984). *The Stanislavski System: The Professional Training of an Actor*. Penguin Books. For a film where subtext becomes explicit for comedic effect, see *Annie Hall* (Woody Allen, 1977, MGM).



## Step-by-step guide

### ROLLING SUBTEXT

- 1 **Introduce subtext:** In your rehearsal session, choose a key scene you want to understand more deeply. Make sure everybody already has at least a basic understanding of the scene before diving into the subtext activity. Run the key scene one last time, then stop the rehearsal for a moment and quickly explain the concept of subtext (“Subtext is what we mean, but don’t say”).
- 2 **Add subtext actors to your service scene:** Add new actors to the rehearsal and ask them to speak the unspoken thoughts of the people in the scene as it runs. It’s easiest to have one subtext actor for each character, and they can either sit offstage or (more fun) be inside the scene, with their hand on the character’s shoulder. This is simply a visual shorthand for “I am not here, I am invisible,” but it seems to help each pair of actors coordinate.
- 3 **Play through with live (“rolling”) subtext:** The character actors will

play the scene as usual – or perhaps a little slower – and the subtext actors will simply speak what they believe their characters are thinking at any moment, using “I” or “me” statements when possible. For example, the character actor might say, “Can you prioritize that?” and his subtext actor might rage, “For f\*ck’s sake! Help me before I lose my job, you idiot!”

To make it possible to follow the action, you might want to start by giving subtext to only one or two characters, then shift focus to others in the scene. It is usually most interesting if the subtext actor and the character actor do not discuss this beforehand – sometimes the character actor will be surprised by the subtext, and this can be revealing.

- 4 **Iterate:** Run the scene a few times with variations on the subtext. What do they suggest? Document your key insights, ideas, bugs, and questions, and return to your rehearsal session.



- A Rolling subtext: as two actors play characters in a scene, another actor (wearing a black shirt) speaks aloud the unspoken thoughts of one character. Subtext is what we mean, but usually don’t say. Bringing it into an investigative rehearsal can reveal deeper motivations, needs, and many new opportunities to create value.



## Step-by-step guide

### SUBTEXT CHAINS

#### 1 Identify a starting statement:

In a rehearsal session, hold the scene at one key statement by a customer or employee, and ask the team, “What would be the subtext of that statement?”

#### 2 Build the chain:

Continue by asking, “What would be the subtext of that subtext?” Repeat. As you go deeper, it might be easier to ask, “Why is that important?”

#### 3 Document and/or build a physical chain:

Document the different levels of subtext on a flipchart. If you have enough people it can also be helpful to create a physical subtext chain of people in the room. Standing in a line behind the key character, each person represents one level of subtext.

#### 4 Explore emotional and practical chains:

After several steps, you will get deeper and deeper into the motivations and emotional lives of the character. For example, a

group working on stories from a telecommunication shop might decide that the statement “Look, I really need the internet!” has a possible subtext of “I can’t get the information I need.” Investigating the subtext chain, they might decide it goes like this:

*Statement: “Look, I need the internet!”*

- 1st-level subtext: “I can’t give my clients what they want.”
- 2nd-level subtext: “I might lose the deal!”
- 3rd-level subtext: “I won’t get paid!”
- 4th-level subtext: “I will lose my home!”
- 5th-level subtext: “I will be unable to protect my family!”

This is a rather emotional chain. A more practical one for the same situation might be:

*Statement: “Look, I need the internet!”*

- 1st-level subtext: “I need to get online.”

- 2nd-level subtext: “I need to download a movie.”
  - 3rd-level subtext: “I need to show a movie to my client.”
  - 4th-level subtext: “I need to show my client what I offer.”
  - 5th-level subtext: “I need to help my client make a choice.”
- 5 Iterate:** explore a few chains with variations on the subtext. What do they suggest? Document your key insights, ideas, bugs, and questions, and return to your rehearsal session.

### Method notes

#### → Assumption-based vs.

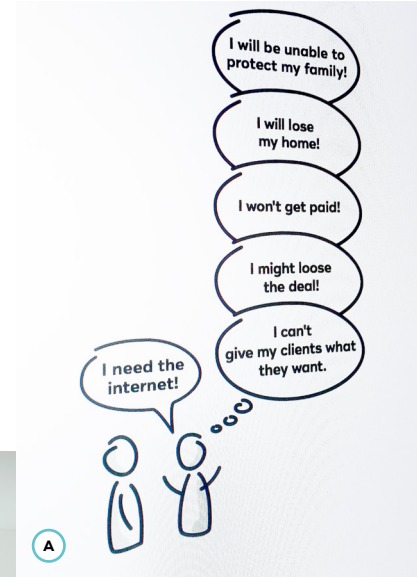
**research-based:** This tool supports the deeper analysis of service situations. Often the subtext levels you identify are based on assumptions, but they can still be valuable as they generate great questions that feed back into explorative research or guide your prototyping. However, when used with research data, the method becomes a



fuller-bodied way of reflecting on and analyzing that data.

→ **Basic needs:** Usually after 5–7 levels on the emotional chain we get down to very basic human needs like protection, family, acceptance, and love – and these deep levels explain why the customer values our service or is angry about the problem.

→ **Middle steps:** The middle steps of a subtext chain suggest potential offerings we could make. For example, from the practical chain we could ask ourselves: How else could we help the speaker get online? Can we offer her an internet stick, a tablet, a rented Wi-Fi dongle? How else could we get the movie to her, or help her show it to her client? Could we offer a downloading service, burn a disc, rent out a screening device or location? How else could we help her show her client what she can do? And so on. The emotional chain also offers potential value: How can we help the speaker give her client what she needs? Get more deals? Handle cashflow? And so on. ◀



A

A visual sketch of a subtext chain.

B

Building a subtext chain works like a deep dive into the motivations and needs of a stakeholder in a rehearsal session.