

The Engine of Empathy: Three Ways To Convey Characters' Emotions

One of the most crucial components of writing a compelling and emotionally engaging screenplay is conveying to the audience *how characters feel about their situation*. In the simplest sense, every narrative film is about a character(s) struggling to overcome and/or achieve something. Marty McFly tries to get back to 1985 without endangering his own existence. Dorothy must travel to Oz so the Wizard can help her return to Kansas. A giant ship hurls itself into an iceberg to cope with a boring love story (or whatever *Titanic* is about).

It stands to reason that an array of emotions would accompany a character's struggle. Frustration, uncertainty, excitement, desperation, anger, determination, humiliation, and courage, to name a few. It's these emotions that allow the audience to empathize with the character and become emotionally attached to their struggle. Without such a connection, the audience will mentally check out and instead fantasize about Christoph Waltz (probably).

Too often, though, writers fail to convey how their characters feel about their situation or struggle. Or, if they do make an attempt, it's through on-the-nose dialogue. "*I can't believe I didn't get the promotion! That makes me frustrated! I'm crying now!*" Yeah, don't do that.

There's no doubt that conveying characters' emotions in a screenplay is challenging; emotions are experienced *internally*, and screenwriting focuses on capturing what's going on *externally*. But it's possible—and necessary. Here are some tips on how it can be done.

Use Strong Action Verbs

When people feel a certain way, different behaviors and actions tend to manifest themselves. Their posture, physicality, speech, and facial expressions are affected. Since screenwriting is all about depicting what is happening *visually*, a great way to demonstrate how a character feels is to use action verbs that carry strong emotional connotations. Verbs that convey how a character is behaving or speaking or moving through space. Words like grimace, trudge, fidget, slump, smirk, amble, beam, stomp, seethe, shudder, cower, squirm, stride. (Consult your friendly neighborhood thesaurus for more!) Action verbs like these connote specific emotions that allow readers, directors, actors, and ultimately the audience to better understand how the character is feeling.

Add Subtext to Scenes

We can probably all agree that emotions are dumb, so they can be difficult for people to process and express. Especially the emotions that accompany the pivotal, life-changing events that movies tend to be about—falling in love, losing something or someone, reliving the same rodent-based holiday over and over again, etc. Characters may not always cope with their emotions in the most effective or honest way, and their behavior doesn't always represent exactly how they're feeling. *But* the subtext of how they act and what they say *does*. Like how the subtext of the familiar line "I'm *fine*" is usually "I'm the *exact opposite* of fine."

In *Fargo*, consider the first scene in which Jerry Lundegaard is being questioned by Marge Gunderson. On the surface, he smiles, laughs, and makes polite chitchat. But inside we know that he's shitting his pants because he's dodging the questions, fidgeting in his chair, and exaggerating his laughing and attempts at small talk. This is one of many examples of great subtext in this film. People are generally good at picking up on subtext, and layering it into your story will clue the audience in to how your character is really feeling about his or her situation.

Juxtapose Contrasting Things Together

One time a man asked me, "What's your favorite position?" I told him, "Juxtaposition!" He promptly broke up with me. Anyway, juxtaposing different things together in a screenplay can emphasize how a character is feeling. For example, you can show a contrast in the way two different characters react to the same event.

In *The Godfather*, Michael Corleone and Enzo the baker stand outside the hospital to intimidate the rival mob who intends to assassinate Michael's father. Enzo is so nervous and shaky that he can't light a cigarette, but Michael lights it with ease, his hand completely steady, indicating that he feels confident and ready to join the family business.

You can also show a contrast between how the same character acts earlier in the story and how they act later on. In the beginning of *Kramer vs. Kramer*, Dustin Hoffman's character has difficulty connecting with his young son and rarely makes time for him. By the end, his son is his absolute first priority, showing that Ted Kramer has developed a deep love and devotion for his boy.

Establishing a contrast between a character and his or her environment can also show a character's emotions—the classic "fish out of water" scenario. In *Edward Scissorhands*, Edward, dressed in all black and having scissors for hands, joins a very pastel suburban community full of rather ordinary, non-scissor-

handed people. There's a stark contrast between the character and his surroundings, and from his actions and reactions, we can sense that he's overwhelmed and afraid, yet curious and inspired.

Audiences respond to emotionally charged scenes and stories. It's in our nature. And showing how your characters feel about their struggle is one of the best ways to let the audience get to know your characters. How they react to obstacles and how they feel about their circumstances shows us their unique perspective on the world. Not every single character is going to feel the exact same way about every situation. We're all beautiful snowflakes, or fingerprints, or my attempts at making an omelet—no two are exactly alike. So let your audience get to know your character and allow us to empathize with them by showing us **all of the feels.**

Guest post by Caitlin Durante. Caitlin is a comedian, writer, and professional script reader. When she's not doing those things, she's watching *Back to the Future* and wishing she wrote it. You can follow her [@cdura](https://twitter.com/cdura).

KLJUČNA VPRAŠANJA

"The following questions are the Three Kings of story telling in my opinion. I believe you must answer the first three questions before you can even think of writing a screenplay. Francis Ford Coppola gave me this exercise a year after we had completed working together on Dracula. I have used it ever since. I use it every day in my writing. If you can answer these three questions then you are ready to proceed to the next step in preparing to write a screenplay."

TRI VPRAŠANJA:

1. Who is/are the main character(s) and what do they want? (What they need is different; see below.)
2. What are the characters' relationships like and what are the obstacles the main characters must encounter and overcome in order to get what they want?
3. In the end, do the main characters get what they want? Is it good or bad for them if they did or did not? (Related: did they get what they need?)

DODATNA VPRAŠANJA:

4. Why does the audience care? What makes us want to watch the characters' journey?
5. What do my main characters need? How does this differ from what they want when we meet them?

HINT:

Want = material things, ego-driven desires

Need = inner desires and conflicts, spiritual

6. Why now? Why is this happening to the characters at this moment? What event, what conditions exist today for this story to take place? Why not yesterday or next year?
7. What are the main characters' wounds/aches? What are the flaws of the main characters? What is the jeopardy? The danger? The price?
8. What do the characters fear most? What shuts them down emotionally? What breaks them into a sweat?
9. Do you have a satisfying ending? Not happy, not sad, etc. but a *satisfying* ending.