

SUBPLOT VS. B-STORY IN SCREENWRITING

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Abstract: *The purpose of the current article is to explain the meaning of the terms "Subplot" and "B-Story" in connection with screenplays, and to reveal their importance in the construct of the script. Therefore, the article refers to: the definition of the terms "Subplot", "A-Story", and "B-Story"; examples of Subplots and B-Story from a notable movie; classification of Subplots as – romantic Subplots, comedic Subplots, thematic Subplots, character background Subplots, and narrative Subplots; specific exemplifications for each case; classification of B-Stories in accordance with their focus as – relationship-focused, character-focused, theme-focused, and worldbuilding-focused or in accordance with the relationships between the B-Stories and the A-Stories as – intertwined, parallel, and independent B-Stories; examples of relationship-focused B-Stories; ways to best weave Subplots into stories in screenplays by taking into account various aspects, such as the relation between Subplots and the A-Story, the Subplot narrative arcs, the Subplots and the theme, the Subplots and the characters, the Subplots and the pacing, and the overcrowding; the importance of understanding the difference between Subplots and B-Stories; the dramatic impact of Subplots and B-Stories in the overall concept of a script, and the striking importance of these elements in the final outcome of a movie as Subplots and B-Stories ultimately work as demarcation elements for successful/ unsuccessful movies.*

Keywords: Subplot; B-Story; A-Story; Theme; Consistency; Storyline; Protagonist

1. What is a Subplot?

A Subplot is a mini secondary story that develops parallel to the main plot/main storyline (i.e. the A-Story) throughout the course of the script. The main job of a Subplot is to always support the main plot while it spices it up, and, therefore, enhances the story in its entirety.

Most screenplays have at least two Subplots, and they can even have more as long as the Subplots are craftily woven into the main plot, consequently adding new dimensions to the script. In this respect, the most crucial thing for the Subplot is neither to deviate from the main storyline, nor to become more prominent than it.

Subplots must support the theme and carry it out in different ways. If one cannot spot the theme, the Subplots can actually reveal it with ease. For example, let's take into account the theme of control – the Subplots can reveal, for example, a wife obsessed with controlling her children, a husband obsessed with controlling his employees and a child who tries to control his dog.

Subplots do not normally include the Protagonist from the very beginning, but they should intersect with him and, thus, affect the Turning Points. They appear in the 2nd Act when new characters are introduced, or they can also show in the 1st Act when different characters such as the best friend, the mentor, or the sidekick

are introduced. After the Turning Points, the screenwriter must return and develop the Subplot(s).

Subplots must have conflict (i.e. they shouldn't be just fillers), and they must be solved by the end of the 2nd Act, or middle of the 3rd Act. They must either heighten, or release tension built up by the main story. If they are employed as a means of heightening the tension, they must cause complications for the Protagonist in the pursuit of his want.

Consequently, they can intersect with the A-Story in order to create the afore-mentioned new complications for the Protagonist. Subplots can run parallel to A-Story or in utter contrast to it, but all Subplots must support and wrap up the A-Story. For example, if the Protagonist wins, the characters in the Subplots will fail to conquer a similar set of problems.

2. A-Story and B-Story

A-Story and B-Story are common Hollywood terms used with reference to long features, as well as TV series.

- **The A-Story** represents the main plot. It is the Protagonist's palpable goal that reveals itself at the Inciting Incident/ Catalyst, and it consolidates with the Protagonist's acceptance of the adventure at the end of the 1st Act. Therefore, the A-Story shows what the Protagonist actually wants.
- **The B-Story** is the Protagonist's secondary goal, an emotionally emphasized spiritual goal, opposed to a palpable one. It actually represents a second problem that the Protagonist has to fix which generally involves the Protagonist directly, unlike the Subplot.

The B-Story reveals itself when the adventure begins, that is in the 2nd Act, in the first 8-10 pages, and it must include obstacles. Sometimes, the B-Story is hinted in the 1st Act, but it doesn't become relevant until the 2nd Act.

For example, in *Aladdin*, in the 1st Act, the Protagonist, Aladdin, meets Princess Jasmine in the marketplace, but the B-Story officially begins in the 2nd Act when Aladdin meets Jasmine in the guise of Prince Ali, and from that very point their love begins to blossom.

The B-Story discloses what the Protagonist actually needs, and thus it represents the theme. Only after the Protagonist achieves his needs, is he able to also achieve his wants. This happens at the climax after the Protagonist has managed to overcome his flaw (i.e. after he has been able to change). And, in fact, his arc proves to be nothing but an illustration of the theme.

One should also mention that especially in action movies, but also in any genre, the B-Story is frequently the love story whereas in romantic movies, the love story is always the A-Story.

However, the B-Story is *not* always the love story, as commonly misinterpreted, but sometimes the love story *can* be represented by the Subplot. In general, near the end of the 2nd Act, the Protagonist either loses the A-Story, or the B-Story, the B-Story usually being the one that fails.

3. Example of Subplots and B-Story in *The Wizard of Oz*

The **A-Story** in *The Wizard of Oz* refers to Dorothy's goal to find the Wizard and return home with his help.

As regards the **Subplots**, one can mention:

'Subplot Objective: The Scarecrow's quest for the brain.

Subplot Objective: The Tin-Man's quest for a heart.

Subplot Objective: The Lion's quest for courage.

Subplot Revival: The Witch rides to the Emerald City and leaves a message for Dorothy.¹

B-Story: Dorothy meets up three characters, the Scarecrow, the Tin-Man and the Lion which will accompany her in her quest since they also want to see the Wizard of Oz. The B-Story is represented by Dorothy's wish to help her friends, as well as the Wizard of Oz who eventually proves to be nothing but a fraud.

One can easily notice that the Scarecrow, the Tin-Man and the Lion are employed by the screenwriters with the only aim to reflect the concept of family itself.

Consequently, the three characters will ease Dorothy into understanding the theme, and she will, thus, understand she has a home where her family loves her.

4. Classification of Subplots

There are various types of Subplots, such as: romantic/ love interest Subplots, comedic Subplots, thematic Subplots, character background Subplots, and narrative Subplots.

4 a) A romantic/ love interest Subplot

A romantic/ love interest Subplot presents the Protagonist in relation to a loved one that can either be a family member, or a person that the Protagonist is fond of, such as his sweetheart, or a close friend. This love interest of the Protagonist makes him vulnerable, thus authentic to the audience which adds character depth, and also helps the audience better empathize with him.

Example: *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*

The A-Story/ the main plot: Harry tries to uncover Voldemort's secrets.

Romantic Subplots: – the evolving relationship between Ron and Hermione;

– Harry's growing feelings for Ginny.

Example: *The Hunger Games*

The A-Story/ the main plot: a woman's fight for survival in a cruel, nationally televised death game called the Hunger Games, and her fight against the oppressive government that authorizes such games called the Capitol.

Romantic Subplot: the romance between Katniss and Peeta that develops alongside the main plot of survival and rebellion.

4 b) A comedic Subplot

¹ <https://thescriptlab.com/screenplay/sequence-breakdowns/1254-the-wizard-of-oz-1939-2/>

A comedic Subplot releases the tension while still having relevance to the main plot. This kind of Subplot should add something fresh to the main story as long as it still keeps with its tone. In a comedy, it may imply a different comedic tone so that it may keep the audience emotionally invested throughout the entire story. In a drama, a comedic Subplot must always be thoroughly conceived so it may fit within the main story frame and not be incongruous. On the other hand, one should keep in mind that a story with no comic relief feels not only flat, but also unrealistic.

To conclude with, a screenwriter can lighten the tone and release tension often through side characters or absurd situations.

Example: the TV series *Friends*

The A-Story/ the main plot: in general, in various episodes, the A-Story refers to ordinary people life's decisions and their relationship difficulties.

Comedic Subplot: Joey's acting gigs or misunderstandings, such as using air quotes incorrectly, or the delightful "How you doin'?" moments.

Example: *The Avengers (2012)*

The A-Story/ the main plot: the superheroes' fight as a team to stop Loki's alien army from enslaving mankind.

Comedic Subplot: Thor's confusion in as regards Earth customs; Bruce Banner and Tony Stark's banter.

4 c) A thematic Subplot

A thematic Subplot bolsters the theme, i.e. it reinforces the idea of the main story, though it presents it from different perspectives for a lifelike effect (i.e. in order to echo the complexity of real life and prove authenticity), as well as to maintain a steady and gripping involvement of the audience throughout the entire story.

A thematic Subplot may resort to recurring elements (such as allegorical images, symbols, motifs, phrases) dilemmas, or any kind of contrasts for the very same reasons.

A motif, for example, contributes to the cohesion of the narrative structure of the main story, and it also emphasizes the theme. For a better understanding, one should take into consideration its definition. A motif is defined as "a repeated narrative element that supports the theme of a story" (...) This could be a prop, a song, a line of dialogue — anything that encapsulates your film's message."²

A thematic Subplot brings forth multiple storylines revealed through multiple characters with the scope of highlighting the theme, while uncovering different contrasting aspects as regards the said theme.

Subplots outcomes should be diverse, sometimes even opposed to the outcome of the main story, therefore embracing all the facets of real life, success, failure and ambiguity as well.

Example: *Les Misérables* by Victor Hugo

The A-Story/ the main plot: Jean Valjean's fight for redemption.

² <https://www.studiobinder.com/blog/what-is-a-motif-in-film/>

Thematic Subplot: Fantine's destruction emphasizes a few themes, such as: social injustice, societal prejudices, the struggle of the working class, dehumanization and compassion.

Example: *The Godfather*

The A-Story/ the main plot: Michael Corleone's transformation from an outsider to the merciless head of the Corleone Mafia family in New York.

Thematic Subplot: Michael's gradual descent into a life of crime reflects the theme of corruption and the price of power, shown through his relationship with his wife, Kay, as well as through the hardening of his soul up to the deadening of his humanity.

4 d) A character background Subplot

Character depth refers to the method by which the screenwriter provides specific reasons for the characters on the grounds of which they can act and react in certain ways according to their life experience, their joy and happiness, pain and suffering or even traumas.

Thus, the screenwriter resorts either to flashbacks, or to simultaneous narratives that will develop alongside the main one, which represents in fact a different kind of Subplot, that is a character background Subplot.

This kind of Subplot may have an explanatory purpose not only for the characters, but also for the entire story.

Example: *A Song of Ice and Fire / Game of Thrones*

The A-Story/ the main plot: The deadly struggle for power and control among a series of noble families that desire the Iron Throne while a supernatural threat from the North endangers all humanity.

Character background Subplot: Theon Greyjoy's background/ childhood story will explain his future betrayal and redemption arc. One refers here at his problems with the Starks, his identity conflict, as well as his need for acceptance and approval.

Being raised by the Starks as a ward/ a hostage, after his father's revolt, Theon struggles with an identity crisis, torn between his upbringing as a Stark and his birthright as a native of the Iron Islands.

Example: *Up (Pixar)*

The A-Story/ the main plot: An old man's journey to fulfill his late wife dream of reaching Paradise Falls only to discover that he must embrace life as it is in the present.

Character background Subplot: The Protagonist's love story/ backstory with his wife represents in fact a background Subplot that justifies his grief and decisions on the grounds of which he wants to go to Paradise Falls.

4 e) A narrative Subplot

A narrative Subplot represents a secondary story that develops alongside the main one with the aim of providing additional depth to the entire storyline by means of exploring various characters or conflicts that intersect with the main plot.

Example: *The Lord of the Rings*

The A-Story/ the main plot: Frodo and Sam's journey taken with the aim of destroying the Ring.

Narrative Subplot: there are various different actions which, in fact, are part of the same story, such as the quest taken by Aragorn, Legolas and Gimli with the aim to rally Rohan and Gondor to fight in the war.

Example: *Stranger Things*

The A-Story/ the main plot: the search for Will Byers, the discovery of a secret government experiment called the Upside Down, and the role of Eleven, a girl with supernatural powers.

Narrative Subplot: Eleven's origin and powers, her emotional journey, and escape from Hawkins National Laboratory.

5. Classification of B-Stories

The aim of B-Stories is to enhance the emotional level of the main story, as well as to render the respective story in a more complex and realistic way. B-Stories can be classified either in accordance with their focus, or with their relationship with the A-Story.

In accordance with their focus, B-Stories can be classified as: relationship-focused, character-focused, theme-focused, or worldbuilding-focused. In accordance with their relationships with the A-Story, B-Stories can be: intertwined, parallel, or independent.

5 a) Relationship-focused B-Stories

Relationship-focused B-Stories often refer either to the romantic relationship between the Protagonist and another character, or to the romantic relationship between two supporting characters.

5 b) Character-focused B-Stories

Besides the main storyline that captures the attention of the audience, B-Stories are also used in a screenplay not only to captivate to audience, but also with the purpose to delve into a character's personal growth, to delve into various issues triggered either by internal conflicts, or by problematic relationships between the Protagonist and other characters or between different supporting characters.

5 c) Theme-focused B-Stories

B-Stories can explore various themes that are distinct from the A-Story as long as the themes still connect with the A-Story.

5 d) Worldbuilding-focused B-Stories

B-Stories can broaden the sphere of the world already built in the script either by introducing different locations, or by investigating conflicts that are indirectly connected to the A-Story.

5 e) Intertwined B-Stories

B-Stories can be directly connected to the A-Story and show events in A-Story that affect B-Stories.

5 f) Parallel B-Stories

B-Stories can run parallel to the A-Story and only seem to be unrelated whereas they actually contribute to the main storyline.

5 g) Independent B-Stories

Sometimes, B-Stories can be relatively independent from the A-Story, and represent in fact a separate narrative thread.

6. Examples of Relationship-focused B-Stories

• Romantic B-Story in an action screenplay

The A-Story can refer to the Protagonist's attempt to stop a villain whereas the B-Story can focus on the Protagonist's attempt to develop a relationship with his love interest.

• Family affectionate B-Story in a drama screenplay

The A-Story can focus upon a business deal whereas the B-Story can present the Protagonist's tensioned relationship with his family.

• Friendship affectionate B-Story in a murder mystery screenplay

The A-Story can imply solving a crime whereas the B-Story can present a series of friendship conflicts within the detective's team.

7. How to best write Subplots

There are several things to be taken into consideration in order to be able to best add Subplots to various stories.

7 a) Relation Subplots – A-Story

Subplots should support the A-Story, but not overshadow it. This means that they should be secondary to the A-Story, and not compete with it because otherwise the audience's attention will shift to Subplots which will, thus, make the A-Story less attractive and relevant for them.

Another important aspect is that they should connect to the A-Story by either advancing it, or complicating it so as to preserve the script consistency as well as its appeal.

Subplots can be introduced early in the script and therefore they can run parallel to the A-Story, or they can be introduced later and consequently merge with the main storyline.

7 b) Subplot narrative arcs

Subplots should have their own narrative arcs, but they have to end before the climax in the A-Story in order not to distract the audience from the main storyline, with the exception of romantic Subplots.

In order to create a sense of completeness, each Subplot should have a beginning point, a rising of the action, a climax, and a resolution, but all of the above-mentioned points should be rendered on a smaller scale compared to the A-Story.

7 c) Subplots and the theme

Subplots should reflect the theme in the screenplay for the script to be able to maintain its consistency, and they should even expand the theme in order to add complexity to the main storyline.

7 d) Subplots and the characters

Subplots should develop relatable, true-to-life characters. They should reveal compelling information about characters which will also make the storyline more complex and, thus, more realistic.

Characters in Subplots should have well-defined motivations and their actions must have consequences both in Subplots and in the A-Story.

Subplots should give depth to the A-Story through a multitude of various secondary characters that can act in opposition to the Protagonist, and, thus, bring different new visions in as regards the theme of the script.

7 e) Subplots and pacing

Subplots should vary the pace of the story, thus managing to keep the audience engaged throughout the entire story.

7 f) Overcrowding

Too many Subplots in a single screenplay must be avoided because cramming will only exhaust the audience, and make them lose their interest.

If some Subplots are not really necessary which means if they do not contribute in a meaningful way, either to the dynamics of the storyline, or to the theme, they can still be saved for other screenplays and weave into their stories.

8. The importance of understanding the difference between Subplots and B-Stories

Understanding the difference between Subplots and B-Stories is crucial for any screenwriter as Subplots and B-Stories serve different purposes.

If a Subplot is mistaken for a B-Story, the screenplay will have no emotional spine which means the story and characters will feel flat. If a screenplay has no B-Story, the plot will still work logically, but it will definitely fail emotionally.

The difference between Subplots and B-Stories

B-Story is a narrative thread that reflects the theme and supports the Protagonist's internal arc (i.e. growth). It is directly connected to the Protagonist, often through a relationship that triggers the Protagonist's growth. Structurally, B-Story is usually introduced in the 2nd Act, and it also reappears around the climax of the A-Story. Since it helps the audience relate to the Protagonist and care for him, B-Story carries a strong emotional function.

In contrast, a Subplot expands the story and the conflict, and it is not necessarily connected to the Protagonist. It usually involves side characters and/or parallel situations. Structurally, a Subplot can appear anywhere in the script. Their impact varies, some are used to provide contrast and, thus, complexity, while others are used with the aim of entertaining. Subplots often resolve independently of the A-Story.

9. The impact and importance of Subplots and B-Stories in the overall concept of a script

9 a) The impact and importance of Subplots in the overall concept of a script

Generally speaking, many of the most unforgettable storylines have been Subplots. For example:

- Elliot's delicate and out of the ordinary friendship with ET;
- the ways of the Force taught by Obi-Wan Kenobi to Luke Skywalker;
- Forrest Gump's lifelong romance with Jenny.

Let's examine the real impact of Subplots in the movie *The Shawshank Redemption*.

A-Story: As Andy Dufresne has been wrongly accused and sent to prison for life, he plans his escape and finally executes it.

Subplots: Andy's relationship with Warden Norton (Nemesis), Andy's relationship with Red (Mentor), Andy's relationship with Tommy (Attractor), Andy's relationship with prison guard Hadley (Trickster), Andy's relationship with The Sisters (Nemesis), Andy as financial adviser, Red and Brooks (Negative Mentor), Red and Andy (Attractor), Red and Institutionalization (Nemesis), and Red and Freedom (Trickster).

To demonstrate how much impact a Subplot can have in the concept of a script, one should take into consideration Brooks in *The Shawshank Redemption*. Brooks seems to function as Red's Negative Mentor because Red follows Brooks' every single step post-prison: same room, same park, same job, and even same disturbed thoughts. Actually, Brooks undergoes a negative transformation that will unfortunately lead to suicide. As Red follows so accurately in Brooks' footsteps, he most certainly will go on the same path toward self-destruction as Brooks.

9 b) The impact and importance of B-Stories in the overall concept of a script

B-Stories have an important **emotional** function. They support the main story, but also elevate it by emphasizing the theme and enhancing character development. Let's examine the real impact of B-Stories:

- **B-Story interacts with the theme** – it serves as a thematic mirror and emotional compass for the Protagonist

B-Story functions as a moral or emotional compass for the Protagonist since it helps him make the right choice at the climax. For example, in *The Matrix*, the B-Story refers to the emotional connection between Trinity and Neo, and her faith in him as a savior, as the chosen one. Thus, the B-Story mirrors the theme, in this case the concept of faith.

- **B-Story interacts with the characters** – it serves as a catalyst for the characters' transformation

B-Story implies an inner change, especially for the Protagonist, but also for the secondary characters. The Protagonist can, thus, grow emotionally, often through a relationship. Example: In *Back to the Future*, only after Marty helps his parents fall in love, can he understand his own place in the world.

- **B-Story provides structural balance**

B-Story often begins in the 2nd Act, and reappears around the climax. It helps the script breathe by altering tone and/or focus. Through its internal stakes, B-Story acts as a counterpoint to the external stakes divulged in the A-Story. This balance

kept by the B-Story prevents settling of the so-called “plot fatigue” which means that the B-Story keeps the interest of the audience alive by shifting attention and care to something new which also gives another emotional rhythm to the screenplay.

- **B-Story involves an emotional payoff**

B-Story often reaches climax just before or during the 3rd Act which makes the climax of the A-Story more powerful. Without the climax of the B-Story, the climax of the A-Story will actually feel meaningless.

Let's examine the emotional payoff provided at the climax of the B-Story in the movie *Up*. B-Story: the old man's internal journey of healing and reconnection, mainly expressed through his growing bond with the kid. The emotional payoff resides in the fact that at the climax, as the kid is in danger, the old man rescues the kid instead of saving his house, the symbol of his past with his late wife. He, who in the beginning of the movie, was an isolated, grieving widower is now able to let go of his house, both literally and symbolically, and chooses to care for someone new.

In conclusion, both Subplots and B-Story must not be confused and, moreover, they must be handled properly as they actually work as demarcation elements for successful/ unsuccessful movies.

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