



Micro-Actions, Subtext & the Quiet Art of Spooky Suspense

A Creative Writing Lesson • 45 minutes • Week 5

By the end of today, you'll leave with *three tips of the trade.*

They aren't loud. None of them shout. But every scene you write from now on will move differently because of them.

Secret One

*Tell the difference between what a character **says** and what they actually *feel*.*

Secret Two

*Replace ~~said~~ & ~~asked~~ with what the body is actually **doing**.*

Secret Three

*Draft a 10-to-15-line scene that actually makes the reader **hold their breath**.*

Why this matters

Strong scenes don't tell the reader how to feel — they hand them a body, a gesture, a half-finished sentence, and let the reader's nerves do the rest.

The Pumpkin Carver's *Secret.*

The Setup

Two friends sit at a kitchen table, carving pumpkins late at night. The knives scrape. The candles flicker.



Character A says

“Are you sure you want to go into the basement?”

Write **two** different micro-actions for Character A. Same line — two meanings.

Example A • Friendly

Sets down the knife, reaches across the table, places a steady hand on Character B's arm.

Example B • Threatening

Slowly turns the carved pumpkin head around to face Character B — carving a jagged slit into its mouth without breaking eye contact.

Spoken words are the *top*.

Subtext is what lives underwater.

10% • Said out loud

“It's just the wind.”

The Waterline

90% • What the body actually feels

fear

secret

suspicion

*characters rarely shout, “I am terrified!” —
they **pretend** everything is fine while their body gives them away.*

***In horror & suspense,** the loud thing is rarely the real thing.*

Toss the ~~said~~. Show them *moving* instead.

The Words That Are Sucking the Life Out

~~said~~

~~asked~~

~~replied~~

~~whispered~~

~~shouted~~

Replace them with

The Micro-Action

*A small piece of body language **before**, during,
or **after** a line of dialogue — that names the
speaker, hints at a feeling, or pulls the room tighter.*

Three Tiny Wins

gripping the doorframe a beat too long

snapping a candy wrapper, again and again

turning a pumpkin head to face someone
without breaking eye contact

Watch what changes when the body starts *speaking*.

×

Weak · Tag-Heavy

“Did you hear that sound?” *asked* Leo.

“It's just the wind,” *said* Maya nervously.

“It came from the closet,” he *said*.

Nothing wrong — but nothing in the room holds its breath.

→

Strong · Subtext + Beats

Leo froze. His flashlight beam trembled against the dusty floorboards.
“Did you hear that sound?”

Maya forced a chuckle, though her thumb compulsively snapped the plastic off her leftover Halloween candy. “It's just the wind.”

Leo stepped back, bumping into the doorframe. His stare locked on the closet latch as it slowly rattled open. “It came from the closet.”

Notice

- ① All dialogue tags were deleted. The body now does the labelling.
- ② Maya says it's just the wind, but her fidgeting thumb tells the truth.
- ③ The trembling flashlight loops back into Week 4 — atmosphere *doing* the work.

The *Subtext* Doctor.

Take the patient on the left. Give it a pulse on the right.

The Flat Script

“Don't touch that old doll,” said Sam.

“Why not?” asked Alex.

“Because it's cursed,” said Sam.

Symptoms: flat. No pulse. No chill in the air.

Teacher Moves

Walk the room. Listen for **beats instead of tags**.

If you hear “said,” gently redirect: *what is their hand doing right now?*

The Prescription

Rewrite this exchange with your partner.

Same scene. Different heartbeat.

01 NO said, asked, yelled, or replied. Show the body, not the label.

02 Give one character a hidden secret — and let the body betray them.

Three doors. Pick one.



1 — The Trick-or-Treat Porch

Two friends on the haunted-house steps. One wants to turn back.



2 — The Late Visitor

*A masked stranger at the door.
They know your name.*



3 — The Midnight Lock-In

*Two students trapped after
a Halloween dance. One of them
did this on purpose.*

→ Pick one. 15 minutes. 6+ lines. 3+ gestures. Zero 'said.' ←

Pick a scene. *Write it.*

Three doors. Pick one. (You can switch halfway through if you must.)

01

Scenario One

The Trick-or-Treat Porch.

Two friends stand on the steps of the neighborhood “haunted house.” One wants to turn back but refuses to admit it.

body hint → the candy bowl

02

Scenario Two

The Late Visitor.

A teenager opens the front door to hand out candy. The masked trick-or-treater won't leave the porch — and knows the teen's name.

body hint → the candy bowl, again

03

Scenario Three

The Midnight Lock-In.

Two students are trapped in the school auditorium after a Halloween dance when the power cuts out. One is keeping a secret about how they got locked in.

body hint → the dark, the exit door

Did you actually *do* it?

Four quiet boxes. Anyone can tick a box. Not everyone can defend one.

1

At least **6 lines of dialogue** in the scene.

Two characters minimum • conversation, not monologue

2

At least **3 distinct micro-actions** doing real work.

body • object • breath • distance

3

ZERO ~~said~~ / ~~asked~~ loops. Zero tags if you can carry it.

the body labels the speaker

4

One character **says one thing**, feels another. **That** is a scene.

subtext • where the suspense is hiding

The Subtext Challenge.

How it works

***Two** volunteers step up and read just **one micro-action + one line** of dialogue from their free write.*

*The rest of the class guesses — **what is the character's hidden emotion or secret?***

No coaches. No hints. Just the body and the words.

Preview • Next Week

Pacing & Climax.

We'll take everything you wrote today and learn how to stretch the suspense until the room goes quiet.

6W3c • L3

Bring your free write

11

Tonight for homework

The No-Tag Horror Scene.

1 PAGE • 200-250

Bring the printed scene to next class.

The Task

Write a 1-page conversation between two characters in a terrifying or eerie situation.
Then strip it bare.

Zero-Tag
Challenge

01 **No tags. *Zero.* None. The body does the work.**

Forbid said, asked, shouted, whispered, screamed. Every line is carried by a body, an object, a gesture.

02 **One character is *hiding something* — an injury, a mistake, or a stranger outside the door.**

Subtext is the engine. The plot depends on it. Pick something sharp.

03 **At least *two sensory details* make the room airless — a loop back to Week 4.**

Scratch, scrape, smell, silence. Whatever makes the reader's neck prickle.

Next class — we use your scene to build pacing

...and find the moment the room ***holds its breath.***

Now go make their skin prickle.

Next week — pacing & climax

