What is subtext?

Trust your reader. Challenge your reader.

Resist the Urge to Explain

**Dialogue**

Subtext makes dialogue memorable;

feelings and thoughts underneath a line of dialogue

Avoid speeches

Back-and-forth dialogue helps generate tension

Don’t’ usually need to add adverbs to your dialogue tags?

Dialogue plus action. Examples and explanation by William C. Martell

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Mf5n9SuRebM

Beware:

jargon


**Plotting**
Start Near the End

Let the story carry them along. Don’t announce the plot points.

Inciting incident, premonition of impending trouble, dilemma, or circumstance that will create the main tension of your novel. There are exceptions: In fairytales you may get: “Here’s where our story begins…” but typically it’s not stated, just shown.

The lock in.
Pivotal hurdle to be faced.
A twist or new problem
Climax and denouement

Imply, without saying, how life for the protagonist will be after the story ends.

These plot points are even more important for the more structured screenplay. “A movie, I think is really only four or five moments between two people; the rest of it exists to give those moments their impact and resonance. The script exists for that. Everything does.” — Robert Towne

Unpredictable = compelling

Backstory beware:

Caution: spending a lot of time on memories of the past can indicate you aren’t developing a character enough for us to infer her past.

Details:

Avoid expository description and explanation (info load)

Ex NOT good -- in Inception  Cobb (DiCaprio) explains how to build dreams that’s a info dump. SHOW a character hates her boss by seeing her spit in his drink

How does The Matrix work? Instead of having Morpheus explain the details to Neo, beat him into the ground with his martial arts.

Telling your story through blatant expository is like mansplaining.

Actions:
Jo canceled their date, claiming her mother was sick. Marisol was depressed. She rolled a bit of pasta onto her spoon, took one bite, then pushed the plate away.

2nd sentence tells. Best to eliminate Marisol was depressed.

You insult your reader with that sentence. No need to explain.

Great example in the movie China Town explained by Gordy Hoffman: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wtanvpwGJXk

In action scenes, use less expected emotions that play off the action itself.
Tension comes from inside the POV character’s emotional reactions to the action.
Tension can be subtle. It can appear in sub text.
There’s also the bigger picture – ending scenes and chapters so the reader wants to turn the page. Ending a chapter on a cliffhanger

Emotions and ideas:

Add tension, try to add the opposite, or conflicting, contradicting inner emotions. Two ideas battling.

Beware: sometimes telling is what is necessary:

Experiment with “telling” a bit more in your own writing, if only in the early drafts. You can always go back and rework the moments, weaving in more “showing” physicality (though several instructors warned against the tired old language of racing hearts, ragged breathing and trembling hands). By digging deeper into a character’s consciousness, you may discover memories and motivations you didn’t even know were

learn more:


Using Symbols and Motifs as Subtext

Symbols—not significance to plot
In the movie, *Divergent*, the factions dress differently. The protagonist is born in a faction that is selflessness. They wear the same shapeless gray clothes. She chooses a new faction defined by bravery and fearlessness. The clothes are black, and members are tattooed and pierced. What the factions wear symbolize the traits/personalities of each of those factions. It is a symbol; there’s no significance to the plot.

**A motif is plot-focused.**

It is symbolic and shows up in a work to bolster the main theme. Often a physical object. **Motifs recur throughout a work, not only once, and they must hold significance to the plot.**

Motifs typically are single objects or happenings that appear multiple times in a book with most of the emphasis placed on the theme; often they are seemingly unrelated items that serve to draw attention to the theme (sometimes in a subtle way). An example that is not terribly subtle would be the movie, *Se7en*, in which the seven deadly sins are represented in the form of murders.

Motifs are often used as subtext. The reader needs to work to find the connection to the theme.

**To sum up:** a symbol’s meaning is determined by its history and purpose in the work, while a motif’s meaning depends on how it is being used in that work.

*What are some symbols and motifs that you’ve noticed in books and movies?*

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**Character development**

Ironic can make good characters great!

*Ex: Without having to say, “hey, how odd House is the best doctor here but he drinks the most on the job.”* Show don’t tell. Let the reader come to you.

Avoid on-the-nose names like Hunter for a bounty hunter

**Let the reader fill in blanks.**

Reveal through small visual details

*Ex: Juno MacGuff, played by Elliot Page — we learned she was quirky and badass through details like the hamburger phone in her room NOT through other characters saying, “Wow Juno! You’re so quirky and badass and witty!”*

Best not to tell our readers exactly what the character is feeling.

**Setting:**

Instead of using lots of detail in your scene wanting the reader to see what you see, better to allow some imagination on the part of the reader.
They are more engaged if they imagine a teen’s room other than the important details for the plot. Trust your reader.

**Twists or Surprises:**

examples -- “I Let You Go” by Clare Macintosh on page 75, ¼ of the way through the book. “The Guest List” by Lucy Foley drops hints and questions within the first five pages then seeds them throughout the novel.

resist: the urge to explain and *deux ex machina*

**Exercises: Tear a book apart!**

Buy a used book that does what you want to do better. Notice how it’s done. Mark it up: underline, highlight, tear pages out, whatever works for you. Learn from a master. Dive into a few books by Stephen King, not only *On Writing*. Do the same for Anne Lamott’s writing alongside her *Bird by Bird*. Feel the effect rather than hearing about the effect.

Study:

- Words and phrases used
- Strong descriptors over verbiage
- Setting to set mood
- Dialogue in different voices, study the amount of the book that is dialogue
- How many sentences does each character speak before the next once responds or interrupts? Often the most effect exchanges are short.
- Pacing, how many pages to a chapter?
- When does surprise, twist, deception, early hint or question (then answers seeded throughout the novel), cross-talk occur? Where? What spurs it on? How does it affect the read?
- How and when does the author use backstory?
- Study the mix and time devoted to “musing” or commentary, and action

A symbol’s meaning is determined by its historical use (think of a cross) and purpose in the work (as a reference to Christ), while a motif’s meaning depends on how it is being used in that work. Explore motifs and symbols in books you enjoy.
http://www.be-a-better-writer.com/cliches.html

A

1. a chip off the old block
2. a clean slate
3. a dark and stormy night
4. a far cry
5. a fine kettle of fish
6. a good/kind soul
7. a loose cannon
8. a pain in the neck/butt
9. a penny saved is a penny earned
10. a tough row to hoe
11. a word to the wise
12. ace in the hole
13. ace up his sleeve
14. add insult to injury
15. afraid of his own shadow
16. against all odds
17. air your dirty laundry
18. all fun and games
19. all in a day's work
20. all talk, no action
21. all thumbs
22. all your eggs in one basket
23. all's fair in love and war
24. all's well that ends well
25. almighty dollar
26. American as apple pie
27. an axe to grind
28. another day, another dollar
29. armed to the teeth
30. as luck would have it
31. as old as time
32. as the crow flies
33. at my wits end
34. avoid like the plague

B

35. babe in the woods
36. back against the wall
37. back in the saddle
38. back to square one
39. back to the drawing board
40. bad to the bone
41. badge of honor
42. bald faced liar
43. banging your head against a brick wall
44. ballpark figure
45. baptism by fire
46. bark is worse than her bite
47. barking up the wrong tree
48. bat out of hell
49. be all and end all
50. beat a dead horse
51. beat around the bush
52. bee in her bonnet
53. been there, done that
54. beggars can't be choosers
55. behind the eight ball
56. bend over backwards
57. benefit of the doubt
58. bent out of shape
59. best thing since sliced bread
60. bet your bottom dollar
61. better half
62. better late than never
63. better mousetrap
64. better safe than sorry
65. between a rock and a hard place
66. beyond the pale
67. bide your time
68. big as life
69. big fish in a small pond
70. big cheese
71. big man on campus
72. bigger they are the harder they fall
73. bird in the hand
74. birds and the bees
75. bird's eye view
76. birds of a feather flock together
77. bite the bullet
78. bite the dust
79. bit the hand that feeds you
80. bitten off more than he can chew
81. black as coal
82. black as pitch
83. black as the ace of spades
84. blast from the past
85. bleeding heart
86. blessing in disguise
87. blind ambition
88. blind as a bat
89. blind leading the blind
90. blood is thicker than water
91. blood sweat and tears
92. blow off steam
93. blow your own horn
94. blushing bride
95. boils down to
96. bone to pick
97. bored to tears
98. bored stiff
99. bottomless pit
100. boys will be boys
101. bright and early
102. brings home the bacon
103. broad across the beam
104. broken record
105. bull by the horns
106. bull in a china shop
107. burn the midnight oil
108. burning the candle at both ends
109. burning question
110. burst your bubble
111. bury the hatchet
112. busy as a bee
113. by hook or by crook

C

114. call a spade a spade
115. called onto the carpet
116. calm before the storm
117. can of worms
118. can't cut the mustard
119. can't hold a candle to
120. case of mistaken identity
121. cat got your tongue
122. caught in the crossfire
123. caught red-handed
124. caught with his/her pants down
125. checkered past
126. chip on his/her shoulder
127. chomping at the bit
128. cleanliness is next to godliness
129. clear as a bell
130. clear as mud
131. close to the vest
132. cock and bull story
133. cold shoulder
134. come hell or high water
135. cost a king's ransom
136. cost/paid an arm and a leg
137. count your blessings
138. crack of dawn
139. crash course
140. creature comforts
141. cross that bridge when you come to it
142. cry her eyes out
143. cry like a baby
144. cry me a river
145. crystal clear
146. curiosity killed the cat
147. cut and dried
148. cut through the red tape
149. cut to the chase
150. cute as a bug's ear
151. cute as a button
152. cute as a puppy
153. cuts to the quick
D
154. dark before the dawn
155. day in, day out
156. dead as a doornail
157. devil is in the details
158. dime a dozen
159. divide and conquer
160. dog and pony show
161. dog days
162. dog eat dog
163. dog tired
164. don't burn your bridges
165. don't count your chickens before they're hatched
166. don't look a gift horse in the mouth
167. don't rock the boat
168. don't step on anyone's toes
169. don't take any wooden nickels
170. down and out
171. down at the heels
172. down in the dumps
173. down on his/her luck
174. down the hatch
175. down to earth
176. draw the line
177. dressed to kill
178. dressed to the nines
179. drives me up the wall
180. dull as dishwater
181. dyed in the wool

E
182. eagle eye
183. easy as pie
184. eat your heart out
185. eat your words
186. enough to piss off the Pope
187. ear to the ground
188. early bird catches the worm
189. earn his/her keep
190. easier said than done
191. easy as 1-2-3
192. easy as pie
193. eleventh hour
194. even the playing field
195. every dog has its day
196. every fiber of my being
197. everything but the kitchen sink
198. eye for an eye
199. eyes in the back of her head

F
200. facts of life
201. fair weather friend
202. fan the flames
203. fair weather friend
204. fall by the wayside
205. feast or famine
206. feather in his cap
207. feather your nest
208. few and far between
209. fifteen minutes of fame
210. filthy vermin
211. fine kettle of fish
212. fish out of water
213. fishing for a compliment
214. fit as a fiddle
215. fit the bill
216. fit to be tied
217. flat as a pancake
218. flip your lid
219. flog a dead horse
220. fly by night
221. fly the coop
222. follow your heart
223. for all intents and purposes
224. for the birds
225. for what it's worth
226. force of nature
227. force to be reckoned with
228. forgive and forget
229. fox in the henhouse
230. free and easy
231. free as a bird
232. fresh as a daisy
233. full steam ahead
234. fun in the sun

G

235. garbage in, garbage out
236. get a kick out of
237. get a leg up
238. get down and dirty
239. get his/her back up
240. get the lead out
241. get to the bottom of
242. get your feet wet
243. gets my goat
244. gilding the lily
245. give and take
246. go against the grain
247. go for broke
248. go him one better
249. go the extra mile
250. go with the flow
251. goes without saying
252. good as gold
253. good deed for the day
254. good things come to those who wait
255. good time was had by all
256. greek to me
257. green thumb
258. green-eyed monster
259. growing like a weed
260. grist for the mill

H

261. hair of the dog
262. hand to mouth
263. happy as a clam
264. hasn't a clue
265. have a nice day
266. have high hopes
267. haven't got a row to hoe
268. have the last laugh
269. head honcho
270. hear a pin drop
271. heard it through the grapevine
272. heart's content
273. hem and haw
274. high and dry
275. high and mighty
276. high as a kite
277. hit paydirt
278. hold your horses
279. hold your tongue
280. hold your head up high
281. hold your own
282. honest as the day is long
283. horse of a different color
284. hot under the collar

I

285. I beg to differ
286. icing on the cake
287. if the shoe fits
288. if the shoe were on the other foot
289. in a jam
290. in a jiffy
291. in a nutshell
292. in a pig's eye
293. in a pinch
294. in a word
295. in his/her element
296. in hot water
297. in over his/her head
298. in the gutter
299. in the nick of time
300. in the thick of it
301. in this day and age
302. in your dreams
303. it ain't over till the fat lady sings
304. it goes without saying
305. it's a small world
306. it's only a matter of time
307. it takes all kinds
308. it takes one to know one
309. ivory tower

J

310. Jack of all trades
311. jockey for position
312. jog your memory
313. Johnny-come-lately
314. joined at the hip
315. judge a book by its cover
316. jump down your throat
317. jump in with both feet
318. jump on the bandwagon
319. jump the gun
320. jump to conclusions
321. just a hop, skip, and a jump
322. just the ticket
323. justice is blind

K

324. keep a stiff upper lip
325. keep an eye on
326. keep it simple, stupid
327. keep the home fires burning
328. keep up with the Joneses
329. keep your chin up
330. keep your fingers crossed
331. kick the bucket
332. kick up your heels
333. kick your feet up
334. kid in a candy store
335. kill two birds with one stone
336. kick his lights out
337. kick the bucket
338. kiss of death
339. knock his block off
340. knock it out of the park
341. knock on wood
342. knock your socks off
343. know him from Adam
344. know the ropes
345. know the score
346. knuckle down
347. knuckle sandwich
348. knuckle under

Cliche list L-Z:
349. labor of love
350. land on your feet
351. lap of luxury
352. last but not least
353. last-ditch effort
354. last hurrah
355. law of the jungle
356. law of the land
357. lay down the law
358. leaps and bounds
359. let sleeping dogs lie
360. letter perfect
361. let the cat out of the bag
362. let the good times roll
363. let your hair down
364. let’s talk turkey
365. lick your wounds
366. lies like a rug
367. life’s a bitch
368. life’s a grind
369. light at the end of the tunnel
370. lighter than a feather
371. lighter than air
372. like clockwork
373. like father like son
374. like taking candy from a baby
375. like there’s no tomorrow
376. lion’s share
377. live and learn
378. live and let live
379. long and short of it
380. long lost love
381. look before you leap
382. look down your nose
383. look what the cat dragged in
384. looks like death warmed over
385. loose cannon
386. lose your head
387. lose your temper
388. loud as a horn
389. lounge lizard
390. loved and lost
391. low man on the totem pole
392. luck of the draw
393. luck of the Irish

M

394. make hay while the sun shines
395. make money hand over fist
396. make my day
397. make the best of a bad situation
398. make the best of it
399. make your blood boil
400. man of few words
401. man's best friend
402. mark my words
403. missed the boat on that one
404. moment in the sun
405. moment of glory
406. moment of truth
407. money to burn
408. more power to you
409. more than one way to skin a cat
410. movers and shakers

N

411. naked as a jaybird
412. naked truth
413. neat as a pin
414. needless to say
415. neither here nor there
416. never look back
417. never say never
418. nip and tuck
419. nip it in the bud
420. no guts, no glory
421. no love lost
422. no pain, no gain
423. no skin off my back
424. no stone unturned
425. no time like the present
426. no use crying over spilled milk
427. nose to the grindstone
428. not a hope in hell
429. not a minute's peace
430. not playing with a full deck
431. not the end of the world
432. not in my backyard
433. not written in stone
434. nothing to sneeze at
435. nothing ventured nothing gained
436. now we're cooking

O

437. off the top of my head
438. off the wagon
439. off the wall
440. older and wiser
441. older than dirt
442. older than Methuselah
443. old hat
444. on a roll
445. on cloud nine
446. on his/her high horse
447. on pins and needles
448. on the bandwagon
449. on the money
450. on the nose
451. on the rocks
452. on the spot
453. on the tip of my tongue
454. on the wagon
455. on thin ice
456. once bitten, twice shy
457. one bad apple doesn't spoil the bushel
458. one born every minute
459. one brick short
460. one foot in the grave
461. one in a million
462. one red cent
463. only game in town
464. open a can of worms
465. open the flood gates
466. opportunity doesn't knock twice
467. over the hump
468. out of pocket
469. out of sight, out of mind
470. out of the frying pan into the fire
471. out of the woods
472. out on a limb
473. over a barrel

P

474. pain and suffering
475. panic button
476. par for the course
477. part and parcel
478. party pooper
479. pass the buck
480. patience is a virtue
481. pay through the nose
482. penny pincher
483. perfect storm
484. pig in a poke
485. pile it on
486. pillar of the community
487. pin your hopes on
488. pitter patter of little feet
489. plain as day
490. plain as the nose on your face
491. play by the rules
492. play your cards right
493. playing the field
494. playing with fire
495. pleased as punch
496. plenty of fish in the sea
497. poor as a church mouse
498. pot calling the kettle black
499. pull a fast one
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<table>
<thead>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>500.</td>
<td>pull your punches</td>
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<td>501.</td>
<td>pulled the wool over his/her eyes</td>
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<td>502.</td>
<td>pulling your leg</td>
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<td>503.</td>
<td>pure as the driven snow</td>
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<td>504.</td>
<td>put one over on you</td>
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<td>505.</td>
<td>put the pedal to the metal</td>
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<td>506.</td>
<td>put the cart before the horse</td>
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<td>507.</td>
<td>put your best foot forward</td>
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<td>508.</td>
<td>put your foot down</td>
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<td>509.</td>
<td>quick as a bunny</td>
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<td>quick as a lick</td>
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<td>quick as a wink</td>
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<td>quick as lightning</td>
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<td>quiet as a dormouse</td>
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<td>514.</td>
<td>rags to riches</td>
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<td>515.</td>
<td>raining buckets</td>
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<td>516.</td>
<td>raining cats and dogs</td>
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<td>517.</td>
<td>rank and file</td>
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<td>518.</td>
<td>reap what you sow</td>
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<td>519.</td>
<td>red as a beet</td>
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<td>520.</td>
<td>red herring</td>
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<td>521.</td>
<td>reinvent the wheel</td>
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<td>522.</td>
<td>rich and famous</td>
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<td>523.</td>
<td>rings a bell</td>
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<td>524.</td>
<td>ripped me off</td>
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<td>525.</td>
<td>rise and shine</td>
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<td>526.</td>
<td>road to hell is paved with good intentions</td>
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<td>527.</td>
<td>rob Peter to pay Paul</td>
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<td>528.</td>
<td>roll over in the grave</td>
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<td>529.</td>
<td>rub the wrong way</td>
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<td>530.</td>
<td>running in circles</td>
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<td>531.</td>
<td>salt of the earth</td>
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<td>532.</td>
<td>scared out of his/her wits</td>
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<td>533.</td>
<td>scared stiff</td>
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<td>534.</td>
<td>scared to death</td>
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<td>535.</td>
<td>sealed with a kiss</td>
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<td>536.</td>
<td>second to none</td>
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<td>537.</td>
<td>see eye to eye</td>
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<td>538.</td>
<td>seen the light</td>
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<td>539.</td>
<td>seize the day</td>
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<td>540.</td>
<td>set the record straight</td>
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<td>541.</td>
<td>set your teeth on edge</td>
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<td>542.</td>
<td>sharp as a tack</td>
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<td>543.</td>
<td>shoot the breeze</td>
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<tr>
<td>544.</td>
<td>shoot for the moon</td>
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<tr>
<td>545.</td>
<td>shot in the dark</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
546. shoulder to the wheel
547. sick as a dog
548. sigh of relief
549. signed, sealed, and delivered
550. sink or swim
551. six of one, half a dozen of another
552. skating on thin ice
553. slept like a log
554. slinging mud
555. slippery as an eel
556. slow as molasses in January
557. smooth as a baby's bottom
558. snug as a bug in a rug
559. sow wild oats
560. spare the rod, spoil the child
561. speak of the devil
562. spilled the beans
563. spinning your wheels
564. spitting image of
565. spoke with relish
566. spring to life
567. stands out like a sore thumb
568. squeaky wheel gets the grease
569. start from scratch
570. stick in the mud
571. still waters run deep
572. stitch in time
573. stop and smell the roses
574. straw that broke the camel's back
575. strong as an ox
576. stubborn as a mule
577. stuff that dreams are made of
578. stuffed shirt
579. sweating blood
580. sweating bullets

T

581. take a load off
582. take one for the team
583. take the bait
584. take the bull by the horns
585. take the plunge
586. takes one to know one
587. takes two to tango
588. the more the merrier
589. the real deal
590. the real McCoy
591. the red carpet treatment
592. the same old story
593. there is no accounting for taste
594. thick as a brick
595. thick as thieves
596. think outside of the box
597. third time's the charm
598. this day and age
599. this hurts me worse than it hurts you
600. this point in time
601. three sheets to the wind
602. three strikes against him/her
603. throw in the towel
604. tie one on
605. tighter than a drum
606. time and time again
607. time is of the essence
608. tip of the iceberg
609. to each his own
610. to the best of my knowledge
611. toe the line
612. tongue-in-cheek
613. too good to be true
614. too hot to handle
615. too numerous to mention
616. touch with a ten foot pole
617. tough as nails
618. trials and tribulations
619. tried and true
620. trip down memory lane
621. twist of fate
622. two cents worth
623. two peas in a pod

U

624. ugly as sin
625. under his/her thumb
626. under the counter
627. under the gun
628. under the same roof
629. until the cows come home
630. unvarnished truth
631. up his sleeve
632. up the creek
633. up to his ears in trouble
634. uphill battle
635. upper crust
636. upset the applecart

V

637. V for victory
638. vain attempt
639. vain effort
640. vanquish the enemy
641. vested interest

W

642. waiting for the other shoe to drop
643. wakeup call
644. warm welcome
645. watching the clock
646. watch your p's and q's
647. watch your tongue
648. water under the bridge
649. weather the storm
650. went belly up
651. wet behind the ears
652. weed them out
653. week of Sundays
654. what goes around comes around
655. what you see is what you get
656. when it rains, it pours
657. when push comes to shove
658. when the cat's away
659. when the going gets tough, the tough get going
660. white as a sheet
661. whole ball of wax
662. whole hog
663. whole nine yards
664. wild goose chase
665. will wonders never cease?
666. wisdom of the ages
667. wolf at the door
668. words fail me
669. work like a dog
670. world weary
671. worst nightmare
672. wrong side of the bed

Y

673. yanking your chain
674. yappy as a dog
675. years young
676. you are what you eat
677. you can run, but you can't hide
678. you only live once
679. young and foolish
680. young and vibrant
681. you're the boss

For a more comprehensive list of cliches, see the Dictionary of Cliches, by James Rogers: