Many Authors fall into the trap of confusing what they're writing about with what they write. The Dramatica theory of story compounds this delusion with terminology and concepts that play into common narrative themes of Destiny or Trust or Faith. Subject matter is what an Author writes about; story structure is what an Author writes.

Novelist Sebastien de Castell on writing with Dramatica:

I've been wrestling with this problem for a while now – of feeling like using a story-form meant having to dump something that was actually important to me as a writer, but with that lens of asking "can I treat the original idea as subject matter and the Dramatica element as the root of the conflict within that subject matter, in other words, the layer underneath," makes the whole process feel a lot more logical to me.

One of the most common mistakes writers make when working with the Dramatica theory of story is mistaking the Storyform for Subject Matter. They'll see an Overall Story Concern of Obtaining and think the characters in their story are personally concerned with obtaining something.

They're not.

These same writers will see a Relationship Story Issue of Value and mistakingly assume that the principal characters in their story will be arguing the relative importance of things.

They won't.

The Storyform is a reflection of the Author's premise—not an indication of what appears on the page. This is why I named my service Subtext. The Dramatica storyform is the premise, or Narrative Argument of your story, broken out into several different Storypoints. It's not what your characters say or do or think—it's what fuels their every move.

Conflating Storyform with Subject Matter results in a Mad-Libs approach to story-telling, a strategy that robs Dramatica of its usefulness by misrepresenting key thematic elements within a narrative.

The productive Author finds a way to dig past the superficiality of Subject Matter to the real source of conflict.

An Approach to Subject Matter Blindness

Novelist Sebastien de Castell is an accomplished and prolific Author. Having written nine novels across two critically-acclaimed series, Sebastien claims a certain level of authority in the area of turning premise to prose.

He also turns to Dramatica and Subtext to help improve the quality of his story-telling.

Sebastien's recent revelation about the role the storyform plays in supporting the intended subject matter of his novels deserves publication:

I was thinking about a frequent problem I run into when trying to construct a story-form for a novel. Often two or three of the domains and concerns will work, but some-where there's an element that just doesn't fit. For example, I might end up with a story-form where everything makes sense except that my Influence Character, whose problem is so clearly the inability to trust people, ends up with the model determining her problem is in Proven.

Now, I've always hated the process of trying to then massage the language around "trust" into "proven" somehow just to feel like the storyform is consistent, so that's often led me to abandon the storyform itself because the alternative is to actually just accept that if you want to follow the Dramatica model, then you need to drop the notion that this character's underlying problem is in her ability to trust and just accept that it has to be in "proven" somehow.

But I was thinking about something you often say when I'm bringing up a throughline problem where you'll say, "no, 'Love' is the subject matter, what's the thing that creates problems to do with love."

So applying that to something like an IC throughline problem, I was thinking that one solution is for me as the writer to turn "trust" from the problem to being the subject matter. In other words, Trust is still the big deal to her (in the same way that "love" or "space ships" might be the "big deal" to a character), but to then root that problem she has with Trust into the Dramatica element produced by the storyform (in this example, proven). Thus it becomes "Throughout the IC's life, she's constantly been exposed to absolute proof that you can't trust people. Her mother proved untrustworthy, her first husband proved himself a liar … etc."

So in that context, I still get to deal with Trust by "rooting" the source of the conflict around Trust in something deeper, in this case, Proven.

In essence what I'm saying is, maybe a way to solve the problem of having what appears to be an inconsistency in a storyform element (when everything else lines up and makes sense but one piece that is nonetheless crucial from the standpoint of the Author) is to go one layer deeper: to treat the Dramatica-selected element as the root of that other thing that initially felt like the problem and may well be the thing the characters are constantly treating/talking about as the problem.

Writing about love is Subject Matter. So is writing about trust, or destiny, or greed, or truth, or prejudice. What lies at the root of these topics is the real source of conflict within a Storyform.

Rooting Out Your Story's Conflict

Subtext provides an easy interface for Authors to quickly root out their story's real source of conflict:

Searching for Love in Subtext

Notice the smaller sub-headings listed beneath each item. These represent an actual Source of Conflict—the root of a potential story's problem as described by Sebastien above.

With access to a database of hundreds of thousands of narrative Illustrations (a collection that grows by the day), Subtext helps pinpoint the problem beyond simple Subject Matter.

Writing about Trust could find the Author writing about an actual Problem of Trust, or it could see him writing about Faith or Doubt. The right answer lies in the Author's intended purpose for writing his story—the premise of the piece:

Trust as Subject Matter

Here, we see what selecting Doubt as the root of our story about Trust does to the final premise or intended purpose of our work:

Doubt as a Source of Conflict

"Keep cross-examining and you can change minds."

"Stop focusing on the criticism of others, and you can be considered old enough to take care of yourself."

Both possible stories turn to trust as Subject Matter (or, in this case, lacking Trust) but find varying levels of Doubt as the actual engine of conflict fueling each and every scene.

And here we see the effect of rooting out Faith as the real source of conflict for our story:

Faith as a Source of Conflict

"Keep pursuing what you want, and you can become married."

"Peace of mind awaits those who stop believing, even if it means failing to experience romance."

Again, Trust in these stories sits at the center of the character's experience—but what truly drives conflict is an imbalance of Faith in another.

Four different stories about Trust, each not about Trust in their own way.

Knowing what to write next is a function of knowing what you're genuinely writing.

Subject Matter colors scene and scenery, the virtual backdrop of our story's intended purpose. The Dramatica storyform, as clarified in premise, reveals the foundation of narrative structure.