

Basic Backstory and Exposition Devices

Backstory is what happened before the film started, and exposition is setting out what has happened and will happen. They are the bane of every screenwriter's life because you must transmit them clearly but with subtlety, and if your audience notices you doing it they will become hostile. Here are some basic backstory and exposition devices.

1. **Overt explanation through dialogue**

This has to be kept to a minimum and handled with subtlety or the audience will reject the film instantly. It must come naturally out of the situation. Alternatively, it can be a deliberate and clever anti-naturalism trick to get the audience's attention – for example, a character talking wittily to camera about their past, or witty subtitles. Never drop into the habit of believing you have to transmit information solely through dialogue.

2. **Non-verbal clues**

This means characters' dress, general appearance, manner, possessions, behaviour etc. Clues will also come via the setting, the character's companions and also through subtext. Film transmits visual information instantly, so exploit that, but again, don't be too obvious. For example, a newspaper open at a page with the headline: 'Dead body found on Main Street' can be comically clichéd (fine if that's the effect you want, dangerous otherwise)

3. **Actions of a person or animal that reveal what happened in the past**

For example, the little boy at the start of *The Big Chill* sings 'Jeremiah was a bullfrog' with his father. This instantly tells the audience that the boy is most likely to have learnt the song from his father, which places the father in time and social milieu.

4. **Arguments revealing backstory**

People will often throw the past back at each other during arguments, so it's a credible way to transmit backstory or exposition quickly and accurately.

5. **Sound**

Sound can speak volumes economically in terms of both screentime and money. For example, if you put a good traffic soundtrack over action that is

being shot with actors in a studio set that really looks as if it could be in the city, your audience will really believe the scene has been shot on location. Music, particularly, can change the audience's perceptions of what's happening or has happened. A scene of someone walking along a road to suspenseful music creates a very different effect from the same scene accompanied by bland music.

6. **The hook**

The hook is a plot twist inserted close to the start 'to hook' the audience's attention. A good example is the corpse at the start of *The Big Chill* or the intergalactic aliens exposed at the start of *Men in Black*

7. **The plot itself**

What you as writer chose to make happen on screen is a form of non-verbal storytelling. A character demonstrates themselves and their past through what they actually do in the story.

8. **Letters and newspapers (either read aloud or visible on screen)**

These should be kept to a minimum

9. **Voice over**

Keep this to a minimum.

By the way, don't feel you always have to tell the audience what's happened in the past immediately. Sometimes withholding backstory and exposition increases suspense. Look how effective it is in *Thelma and Louise* when the information that Louise was raped in the past is withheld. The old saying is that newer writers tend to tell the audience too much, experienced writers tend to tell them too little.

In conclusion, never forget that your *actual choice of scenes* provides exposition and backstory. This may sound obvious, but it's very easy just to write scenes off the top of your head without carefully considering the most powerful and economical way of driving your story and its characters forward. Keep asking yourself *the point* of your scene (in terms of character, plot and message).

For an example of good exposition and backstory transmission, see my article ['Exposition and backstory in *The Big Chill*'](#)

