Much of the power of a story lies in its **subtext**, the stuff between the lines and under the surface that gives the action of the story meaning.

And that stuff is pretty powerful.

Two tools for creating subtext are **motif** and **metaphor**.

A **motif** is anything in your story that's repeated for effect or meaning.

If something appears once in your story, it’s not notable.

If it appears twice, it’s a coincidence.

If it appears three times, your reader’s subconscious mind is going to sit up and say, “Hello.” (If it appears twenty times, your reader's conscious mind is going to say, “I get it, I get it already.” Don’t overdose on motif.)

One of the most effective ways to deepen the meaning of your story is to go through a completed draft and look for things that show up often, or that are only repeated twice but that happen in key scenes. Then look at that repetition and see if there’s a deeper meaning there, something you can use other places in your story.

To be really useful, however, a motif has to grow up to be a **metaphor**.
A metaphor is a concrete object that represents an abstract idea. The concrete object is called the **vehicle** because it carries the abstract idea, which is called the **tenor**.

Unlike a symbol, which generally has only one meaning (flag = nation), a metaphor's meaning depends on its context.

The color red, for example, is always a signifier that something is not right in *The Sixth Sense*; whenever it appears, the viewer is being given a clue to the otherworldly secret at the center of the plot.

But in the *Sherlock* episode, “A Scandal in Belgravia,” red signifies passion: the sexual passion of Irene’s red lips, Molly’s passionate love for Sherlock in the wrapping on the gift she gives him, Sherlock’s passionate need to get into Irene’s house to expose her which leads him to ask for a bloodied face as a ticket in.

That need for context means that metaphor is always personal to your story. The metaphors that you choose, consciously or subconsciously, are part of its deeper meaning; they grow organically from the story you’re telling. That’s why it’s best to find the metaphors that already present in your text after your first draft, rather than superimposing a literary idea on it.

Motif and metaphor are ways to deepen your story's meaning without putting that meaning blatantly on the page. Through careful analysis of your completed first draft, you can find the things that you unconsciously put into your story and enhance them to create the kind of emotional subtext that draws a reader in without hitting her over the head with MEANING. The repetition of those motifs and metaphors can also give your story unity, making the reader feel as if she’s in safe hands, that there’s an authority in complete control of the narrative.

Although motif and metaphor seem as though they belong in a English class, they’re actually valuable, practical tools for writing a compelling and unified story.