

SHOW, DON'T TELL



“Don't tell me the moon is shining; show me the glint of light on broken glass.”

—— Anton Chekhov

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Hi folks,

This is a very short eBook on possibly the most universal truth about writing fiction... whenever possible, show--don't tell.

While it might be known by all writers, it's a writing rule that many new writers struggle with. Heck, many of us 'old' writers struggle with it, too. I'm lucky to have my critique group to point out when I'm telling and not showing. Otherwise, I'd make a mess of it.

But that's not because it's hard to deploy. It really isn't. For me, at least, it's just that I get so absorbed in all the rest of what I need to pay attention to that I forget about it.. Another reason why you want to have a group of other writers to review your work. We just don't see our own mistakes very well.

This is one of the reasons I decided to write this short book– because new writers have so much to learn and absorb. Keep this by your side and refer to it whenever you need to.

Enjoy and learn.

Lynn

INTRODUCTION

A popular rule of thumb in writing is, “Show, don’t tell.”

The goal with this technique is to describe what is observable and what the character sees in a way that draws the reader into the story rather than forcing them to look in from the outside. In other words, you are allowing the reader to feel closer to what’s happening in the scene.



It’s the difference between saying merely that the lantern in this picture to the left “sits on the bricks illuminating the small space around it,” or going beyond that to say “the lantern appeared out of the dark like a small glow bug to illuminate the pavement around it.”

One tells you what to see, while the other allows you to see.

When you ‘show’ a reader something either through action, words, thoughts, senses, or feelings, you’ve immersed them in the story, making them feel more a part of the story rather than just an observer.

When you merely ‘tell’ them something through either exposition, summarization, or description, you’ve pulled them out of the story. You are feeding them information *you want them to know*.

As Tim Grahl, CEO of Storygrid says, ‘showing’ means focusing on what a video camera could capture, such as:

- Physical actions and reactions
- Facial expressions
- Body language
- The environment and how it changes
- What is seen, heard, smelled, tasted, and touched
- The words people say and how they say them

When you ‘show’ you are illustrating to the reader what’s happening, and when you ‘tell’ you’re merely telling them *about* it. And in the second instance, it’s as if the reader is once removed from the action.

Here’s an example:

Mary felt nauseous and hurried from the room, hoping to make it to the ladies’ room before she had an accident.

This is telling your reader that Mary feels sick to her stomach. It’s impersonal and feels as if this happened to Mary earlier in the day and you’re relating the story about what happened. The reader is ‘once removed’ from the story.

But what if you described Mary’s feelings this way?

Mary’s stomach roiled, and the taste of bile flooded her mouth. She was going to be sick and had to get to the bathroom.

Now, the reader can almost feel what Mary is feeling. The reader is NOT once removed.

Let’s use an example of describing a storm setting.

“The day was cloudy and dark, and I could tell it would begin to rain soon.”

Again, this feels impersonal and bland. You’re being asked to picture a stormy day but without any sensory description. Try this one instead.

“Dark clouds moved in to blot out the sun, threatening to explode in a violent rainstorm.”

Now, the reader feels involved in the action of the oncoming storm.

Here are some suggestions on how to enhance a reader’s experience by ‘showing’ rather than ‘telling.’

1. *Use the five senses: (taste, smell, touch, hearing, sight).*

Telling: I could smell death before I even reached the door.

Showing: The putrid odor of the decomposing body layered the inside of my nostrils and mouth as I breathed in, making me gag.

2. *Use dialogue.*

Telling: Her dress was so tacky, it looked like an oversized bath towel.

Showing: “Jeez, that’s not a dress she’s wearing, it’s an oversized bath towel.”

3. *Use similes and metaphors.*

Telling: Mabel’s house was the only house at the top of the clearing.

Showing: The house sat alone atop the clearing like the last kid chosen for a dance.

4. *Use verbs instead of adjectives. Verbs show, while adjectives tell.*

Telling: angry

Showing: her face burned with anger

5. *Identify things by name when possible.*

Telling: the town or the street

Showing: Sioux Falls or Johnston Avenue

6. *Limit the use of adverbs of degree like ‘very.’*

Telling: It was a very hot day.

Showing: The day was hot enough to fry an egg on the sidewalk.

7. *Adverbs are weaker by nature, so pick verbs that carry an impact.*

Telling: She yelled loudly.

Showing: She bellowed.

8. *Be specific.*

Not–The flower... But–The burgundy rose

Not–The distant noise... But–The distant hum of the turbine...

While ‘telling’ is a narrative short cut and a quicker way to divulge the information you have, it’s as if you don’t trust the reader to see what you see or feel what the character feels. By *showing* the reader, you’re creating a strong visual in their minds and allowing them to interpret what they see.

As Reedsy says, “‘Telling’ almost always grinds your narrative momentum to a halt.” That’s because you’re lecturing your audience by telling them what you want them to know rather than involving them in the action.

The good news is that it’s your choice. Perhaps ‘telling’ just fits the narrative better or gets the story to a specific point more quickly.

Remember, though, that when you merely recount events to your reader, the story may come off like, “Let me tell you what happened on my way to the store today.” Meaning... you’re talking ‘at’ your audience rather than involving them in the story.

And involving them in the story is a more memorable experience for them.

Here are a couple of short practice paragraphs for you:

SHOW, DON’T TELL EXERCISE

Instructions: Rewrite these paragraphs by replacing the ‘telling’ exposition with a narrative that ‘shows’ the reader what you want them to see. Practice incorporating some of the suggestions we’ve explored above.

‘Telling’ example:

Winter had set in, and the mountains of New Hampshire were dark and cold. The house sat amongst a bank of trees, obscured by a maze of bushes, branches, and small piles of pine needles. A dirt road led up to the old building, winding through the forest, past boulders and trickling streams.

As Janine approached the dilapidated structure, she pictured the stark features of her grandmother. It wasn't a pretty picture in Janine's mind. Her grandmother was a strict disciplinarian and quick to use either a ruler or a cane to dispense justice. The features of her face only served to enhance what Janine thought of as her grandmother's mean-spiritedness.

Your rewrite here:

IN CONCLUSION

I suggest you join a writing critique group to help keep you on top of techniques like this one that can slip under the radar if you're not careful. But once you get used to 'showing' your reader what you want them to see and feel rather than merely telling them, your writing will begin to sing.

Happy Writing!



After retiring from a 35+ year career in the nonprofit world, Ms. Bohart launched her own freelance writing company, Lil Dog Communications, and now writes for clients all over the world. She holds a master's degree in theater, has taught "Crafting the Story" through Green River College for 10+ years, and has written for both Patch.com and the Renton Reporter.

Currently, she has eleven paranormal mystery novels, two short story books, and now three nonfiction books on Amazon, along with several books on writing offered through her website.

As a mystery and true crime aficionado, she has redesigned her author website into ***The No Alibi Zone*** to showcase criminal investigations. Her bi-monthly newsletter called "Let's Talk About Murder," includes blog posts and interviews with people who talk about, write about, and investigate crime as well as information on writing, her summit presentations, and her books. You can sign up to receive the newsletter for free by going here on her website: [Sign up here](#).

If you're interested in Lynn's story coaching services, you can reach out to her here: Lildog67@icloud.com or visit her website.

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