

## Show Don't Tell

Tim Shoemaker

*To write well... we need to SHOW A STORY... NOT TELL IT.* Readers want the FULL EXPERIENCE of a good story— NOT a QUICK SUMMARY of what is going on. Think of your readers as BLIND... they can't see the GREAT STORY in your HEAD.

**Example A:** Let's look at SHOWING someone is COLD versus just telling.

Telling: *Katy was really cold while she waited for the bus.*

Showing: *Katy rubbed her hands together, then cupped them over her mouth and blew on them. It didn't help. She drove her hands in her pockets and jumped in place. She had to get her blood circulating. She looked down the block. Still no bus. If she'd known the driver was going to be this late she'd have brought her gloves—or maybe some hot cocoa.*

**Example B:** Lets look at showing someone is ANGRY versus just telling the reader they're angry.

Telling: *Kyle's Dad found out what he did and grounded him. Kyle's Dad was really angry.*

Instead, show them what happens—and let the reader figure out Kyle's dad is angry.

Showing: *Kyle's dad slammed his fist on the table so hard that coffee burped out of his cup and splattered onto the floor. "How many times have I told you not to hang around that kid?"*

*Kyle kept his eyes on the floor and his mouth shut. Did Dad really want him to answer that?*

*"Look at me when I talk to you."*

*Kyle forced himself to look up. There was something almost funny about his Dad's face—so incredibly red—with that vein popping out in his neck like he'd swallowed an extension cord.*

*"So what am I supposed to do with you—huh?"*

*Kyle raised his hand. "Give me another chance?"*

*Dad leaned in close. "Go to your room, smart guy."*

*Kyle didn't wait to be told again. He bolted from his chair and stomped out of the kitchen.*

*"And you're going to stay there... all weekend."*

*Terrific. Kyle took the stairs two at a time.*

*"Did you hear me?"*

*How could he not? Everybody in a three-block radius probably heard him.*

**Example C:** Lets look at an example of SHOWING someone is HELPFUL and STRONG.

Telling: *Carlos was the kind of guy who was really helpful. And not only that, Carlos was really strong.*

Showing: *Anthony struggled to lift the plastic storage container while Matthew slouched in his chair, watching. "What does Mrs. Blair keep in here, bricks or something? Give me a hand."*

*Matthew grabbed the other end. Together they raised the box a few inches off the floor, shuffled a few feet—and let it drop. Matthew put his hands on his hips and arched his back. "This thing weighs a ton. Maybe we can slide it."*

*Carlos walked into the room and set his backpack on his desk.*

*"I got a better idea," Anthony whispered. "Let's make somebody else try to move it."*

*Matthew grinned.*

*"Hey Carlos," Anthony said. "Mrs. Blair needs someone to grab this box for her."*

*Carlos hustled over, snapped the container off the floor and hefted it onto his shoulder in one smooth move.*

*"Where does she want me to put it?"*

If you want the reader to KNOW WHAT SOMEONE IS LIKE... DON'T JUST TELL THEM... put them in ACTION and LET THEM SEE IT.

WHAT ABOUT ACTION?... often we TELL what happened... we SUM IT UP, when we *should SHOW THE ACTION.*

FOUR TIPS FOR "SHOWING THE MOVIE"... For SHOWING INSTEAD of TELLING.

1. SHOW THE READER WHAT IS HAPPENING... Let them INTERPRET WHAT IS GOING ON. If you want to say someone is angry, or cold, or scared, or nervous... don't use that word... SHOW IT.

2. CHOOSE THE WORDS THAT SHOW THE PICTURE BEST... WALKED out of the room... versus STOMPED out of the room...

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### 3. SHOW ME ONLY WHAT IS IMPORTANT TO THE CHARACTER at THAT MOMENT.

Is SHOWING just *putting MORE DESCRIPTION in your writing*? NO. Showing is your character reacting to what is happening around them. It is letting the reader see what is going on inside their head. Only describe what is important to your character at that time. And only give me LITTLE BITS of DESCRIPTION at a TIME.

### 4. For REALISTIC... MOVIE-LIKE WRITING...

show me what is going on OUTSIDE your character...and then show me how your character REACTS. Just a little of each. Alternate back and forth.

**Example D:** Lets look at a sample of SHOWING someone LOVES her dog versus TELLING... BUT then we're going to break it down and see how we are careful to alternate what is going on OUTSIDE MY CHARACTER with HOW MY CHARACTER IS REACTING.

Telling: Cheryl's Golden Retriever walked over and lay down next to her. Cheryl loved her dog.

Showing:

The Golden Retriever padded over to where Cheryl sat on the top step of the porch.  
Cheryl smiled and reached for her "Hi, Candy-girl."  
Tail answering happily, Candy curled up on the warm deck and snuggled close.  
Cheryl cradled her dog's head on her lap. "I'm going to tell you a secret, Candy-girl," she whispered.  
"Something I haven't told anyone."  
As if eager to hear, Candy raised her head slightly.  
Gently working one hand behind Candy's ears, Cheryl stroked and caressed the soft folds. Glancing over her shoulder, Cheryl leaned in close. "I think I love him."  
Candy looked at her with an unblinking, almost dreamy gaze.  
"And I think you like him too." Cheryl kissed the top of her retriever's head. "I just wish Mom would see him like you do."

Breaking it down...

Outside of our character:

The dog approaches.

Reaction:

Cheryl smiles (feelings) reaches (action) greets her (speech).

Outside of our character:

Dog is happy, lays next to her.

Reaction:

Cheryl cradles dogs head. Starts to share her secret feelings.

Outside our character:

Candy raises head, appears to listen.

Reaction:

Caresses her dog, tells her the secret.

Outside our character:

Dog looks at her with dreamy gaze.

Reaction:

Kisses dog and talks to her.

We show a little of what is going on OUTSIDE our character...

Then a little of how our character REACTS...

-What they DO

-What they THINK

And we end up giving them writing that SHOWS a story instead of just summing it up.

**Make your reactions REALISTIC!**

You need to make them realistic as far as the order in which they occur.

**Generally, the order of your reactions are FEELINGS, ACTION, SPEECH.**

**You don't always have to show all three (feelings, action, speech), but whatever you show generally follows that order or it won't read right.**

**Avoiding the "telling" traps!**

**Common areas in a manuscript where we often tell instead of show**

**A. What a character senses-** (sees, hears, smells, touches, tastes, and feels)

**The trap is when we limit our descriptions to using words like "nervous", "angry", etc.**

-Try not to use the "telling" word.

-Use action or dialogue to help the reader understand how someone feels.

**B. Back story** or other information the author wants to tell the reader.

-Avoid adding back story details as an author or narrator (this is a common "telling trap") or as one character telling another one something they BOTH already know for the sole purpose of informing the reader.

**C. Descriptions** of people, a setting—when described by the author vs. POV character.

Thanks for attending! -Tim Shoemaker