

# Show Your Story, Don't Tell It!

The Question

## What does this do for your story?

In everything you learn in this industry, always test it before you change your entire manuscript. Even if something works for another writer, it may not work for you. Remember, creativity is subjective.

## Show don't Tell

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

**- Anton Chekhov 1860 - 1904**

The most successful writers know that showing the reader their stories pulls their readers into the confrontations and accomplishments of the main character and enhance the plot. The question is, why do most new writers back away from this concept?

## Visual Effects

*A woman walks into a dark apartment. This is her place so she's comfortable and doesn't turn on the lights. Moving down the dark hallway, she enters the living room at the back of the house. She hears a noise and turns to face a man dressed in black. He raises his arm holding a wrench and she blacks out.*

This is a great scene for a movie, but where does it leave the reader? There is no tension. There is nothing to bring the reader into the danger and horror the woman feels. By the end of this exercise you should be able to SHOW the same scene in your own words, in prose that describe the scene and bring in the emotions of the character

## **Using your pen as your paint brush**

Our job as writers is to paint the picture of events for our reader. Our prose must stir emotion and inspire us to root for the protagonist. It is no longer in vogue with today's audiences to have an author TELL a story to them like the fairytales of old. And, when we as authors TELL the story to our audience we allow the reader to be the director of our story. They see what is familiar to them not what you want them to experience through your plot and characters.

TELLing vs SHOWing is the difference between giving the reader a laundry list of events and characteristics that they can manipulate and painting an image within the prose that shows the reader exactly what you, the author, want them to see.

1. To SHOW as opposed to TELL is to use what I call picture nouns and action verbs
  - a. Stronger verbs SHOW the action
  - b. Picture nouns SHOW the object of the action

If you want to take the reader through a garden, you need to give the character a reason for being there.

**Mary walked through the garden to pick a flower.**

Walked is a weak verb because there are many ways to walk. To pick a flower is a weak verb phrase. Both leave the reader to visualize the action from their own experience, letting them direct your characters actions. Our English language has many deeper levels of descriptive verbs and nouns.

1. Verbs:
  - a. Try one of these:
    - i. **Hiked**
    - ii. **Marched**
    - iii. **Meandered**
    - iv. **Skipped**
    - v. **Staggered**
    - vi. **Strolled**

All of these give the reader a different impression of the way Mary walked through that garden. How you as the author want Mary to move must reflect in the verb you use. You cannot paint a true picture for the reader to see in their minds eye if you do not choose the correct words.

Beware of words that come from the thesaurus. Just because a word may have a similar meaning, does not mean that you can use it as a substitute to sound more intelligent. Mary can **gate** through the garden, but it creates an entirely different picture.

1. Nouns:
  - a. Or these:
    - i. **Picked a pink rose**
    - ii. **Plucked a yellow daisy**
    - iii. **Cut a purple pansy**

Each of these nouns, in combination with a specific verb, gives a definite picture of the character's action. This defines you the director of the story. You SHOW the exact action of the character and the reader sees the image you want them to see. Then you will end up with something like this:

Mary wandered down the garden path. Coming upon a patch of flowers, she bent down and plucked a pink rose.

(Use the next few lines to write your own version of this sentence)

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## Step 2

### **Pull out the emotions**

(Let the reader feel the emotions, don't tell them what to feel.)

Without emotions, your novel has no drama and when we TELL a story, there are no emotions. Emotions are the fertile ground in which to let your reader visualize the picture you've painted in your head. Without immersing the reader into the feelings/emotions of the character, they cannot experience the events taking place in the story – your job as an author is only half done. You must go beyond the flood of sights, sounds, conflicts and contradictions that fill a normal person's life. Take you reader into the character's world so they can experience every word of prose with them.

### Specific Emotions

**The flowers in the garden smelled great to Mary and she was peaceful.**

WAS is a weak verb. Was is the most used nonspecific to-be verb that a writer can put into a sentence. It is like using a placeholder because it does nothing to paint the picture for the reader.

**The flowers in the garden smelled great to Mary and she felt peaceful.**

When we use a word that TELLS the reader how the character is feeling we still disconnect the reader from the character's feelings. How did Mary feel peaceful? What feelings did she feel? Using a phrase like this does not allow the reader to experience Mary's emotions. It does not connect them.

**The flowers in the garden smelled great to Mary, her racing heart slowed, and for the first time in an hour, she drew a deep, refreshing breath into her lungs.**

But, to SHOW the whole story we have to know why she is there in the first place. **On her walk to shake her woes, Mary passed the park. She drew in a deep breath, languishing in the fragrance of the flowers that lined the path. She turned away from her**

problems and followed the sidewalk through the greenery. Letting the cares that weighed on her wash away under the aroma of the flowers, she bent down and plucked a pink rose to comfort with her.

The first thing you may notice is that we added word count as they call it in the publishing world. All these examples let the reader know that Mary is looking for a way to relax. Unlike the first few examples, the last two create a distinct picture in the reader's mind, they paint the picture of what the author wants them to see and feel. It also connects the reader to Mary by immersing them into the peace she seeks.

**Take away the shortcuts**  
(Bland Linking Verbs)

Many new writers fall into the trap of writing with shortcuts. These are prevalent when the writer comes to expressing emotions. **Was, were, has, are, is feel and felt** are all words you should pay special attention to if you want to avoid the TELL in your writing.

**The boy Mary passed on the path smiled at her. He had on a black sweater and his eyes were bright green. Mary wondered why someone so young was in the park, alone, but she didn't stop to ask.**

-Or-

**The boy Mary passing on the path smiled at her. He wore a black sweater that shielded him from the light breeze. Mary wondered why someone so young, with his bright green eyes shining, walked through the park, alone, but she didn't stop to ask.**

Be wary of bland, linking verbs when writing emotions.

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**Take away your shortcuts**  
(Thinking Verbs)

Another shortcut new writers fall into is in using thinking verbs. **Think, know, believe(s), wants, desires, understand, realize, imagine, love, hate, etc...** Again, these, when used to express an action, are almost always a TELL, and should be avoided.

**Mary wondered what it would be like to be that young again.**

-Or-

**Mary pushed aside a lock of hair from her forehead. *What would It be like to be that young again and not have a care in the world?***

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### Events

An easy way to see whether you are TELLing or SHOWing is to evaluate the words you use to write the scene. Are your words telling the reader how the character reacts to an event?

**Then, in a totally unexpected move, John came up behind Mary.**

With the phrase, “**in a totally unexpected move,**” we are telling the reader that John is surprising Mary.

**Mary turned and took a step back when she heard John come up behind her.**

**Letting out a shuddered breath, she forced a calming one into her lungs.**

***If I just keep moving away, I'll be fine.* The breath caught in her lungs when John reached out for her.**

In this example, the writer shows Mary’s surprise and fear. It creates a more dramatic read.  
(Use the next few lines to write your own version of this paragraph)

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### Step three

#### **Let the reader see the action**

SHOWing is also about eliminating the ambiguity within your narrative. As said previously, an author’s job is to paint the picture of the scene using their words as their paintbrush. If you assume the reader knows what you see in your mind, then, as the old adage says, you make an “ass” out of “u” and “me”.

Take a look at this phrase.

**An old shack sat in the backyard.**

There is nothing wrong with this sentence, but, your definition of an old shack may not be the same as the readers? Yet if we say something like this:

**An old shack slumped in the backyard like a broken weed,  
its pale white paint faded and flaking. Its door, hanging  
limp on its hinges, swayed in the gentle breeze.**

If you are explicit enough, you, the author, and the reader should see the same old shack.

## Step Four Let your dialogue “speak”

Dialogue in a novel is not a conversation between your characters. It’s main purpose is to deliver facts about the plot to the reader and give insight into the characters motivation. It is important how your characters speak to each other. It is also important how they act and what they hear around them so you don’t end up with talking heads.

**“I ain’t never did see nothin’ like it.”**

vs

**“Once again I had to cover for my imbecile boss. But I couldn’t let the project go forward his way. It would have cost the company millions!” He took in a slow deep breath. “I wish I could tell the board and not feel guilty about ruining his career.”**

Neither of these samples of dialogue give the reader a description of the character who said the lines of dialogue. They don’t know who they are, what race they are, or even if they are male or female. But, in each example, you see the character’s qualities and a flash of their background.

### Let the reader hear it

Speech tags can be useful tools for SHOWing rather than TELLing your story. Unfortunately, most people use them as TELLs.

**“Let’s go home,” John said nervously to Mary.**

**“Let’s go home,” John said, his hands shaking.**

The first line TELLS the reader that John is nervous. By replacing the adverb with description, you SHOW the reader that John is nervous. One word of caution, though, in today’s literary market, more and more agents and acquisition editors frown on speech tags that include anything that does not refer directly to speaking. I have to say I think the major concern here is with the added adverbs like in the above example. If you replace the adverb with a showy piece of description, I doubt anyone will call you on it.

The reader sees more of the character’s emotional state. When you use action tags in the dialogue the tag identifies the speaker without the use of the “said” that can become boring.

**Reaching out, John stared into Mary’s eyes. “Let’s go home.”**

### Kill the adverbs

The lines of dialogue below are examples of another common mistake that new authors make: over use of adverbs. This is used fluently in European writing, but not for the

American audiences. But adverbs are not just found in speech tags. All writers, especially new ones, tend to overuse them. With a little effort, adverbs are easy to trim from your manuscript. If you take a close look at their use, you will see that adverbs are, most of the time, redundant.

**Mary raised her hand and pushed at the air in front of her.  
Screaming loudly, "Be quiet!"**

First off, Mary's gesture and exclamation point let me know Mary shouted the dialogue, so that adding the words **screamed and loudly** together make the statement redundant. Think about it, tagging loudly onto screamed is silly. How else can someone scream?

**Keeping low, John quickly raced to the other side of the path.**

Again, there is no other way to race other than quickly.

**Keeping low, John raced to the other side of the path.**

**When the plane tilted sideways, John was thrown completely out the open door.**

Really? Is there a chance that some reader will read this and wonder if John left a leg or an arm inside the plane when he went out? No. A better version would be:

**When the plane tilted sideways, John slid out the open door.**

See how removing the adverb and adding an action verb can create a picture for the reader?

**Not wanting to sound totally stupid, John changed what he was about to say.**

As opposed to

**Not wanting to sound stupid, John changed his announcement.**

Do you really need the "**totally**"? Does it add to the story? Strengthen the sentence? No. It just adds a word, and a weak one at that. Also, the weak verb phrase (what he was about to say) was replaced by an active verb phrase

**Knowing the boy was exceptionally smart; John expected no less from him.**

As opposed to

**John expected no less from the smartest boy in his class.**

Again, the “**exceptionally**” is just not needed. If you really want to stress the brains of the boy, use a stronger verb or verb phrase. Sometimes, as here, it just takes rearranging the sentence to make it active. Or, you can give more info as in the sentence below.

**Knowing the boy tested well, John expected no less from him.**

### When is it okay to tell and use adjectives?

Keep in mind that writing must have balance on every page – in every paragraph. A novel that turns out as one big SHOW might be the worst thing ever written. And, there are times when you may need to tell. When one character relays to another character something that the reader has already read, you would not want to “SHOW” the entire scene again. Using a sentence like, **Then, with his eyes staring at the ground, John told Mary how sorry he was to have involved her in his argument with Bruce.** This will suffice and move the story forward as long as the confrontation between Bruce and John was part of a previous scene.

Also, when the reader needs to know something, but doesn’t need the details (or one character is relaying an event that happened earlier in the story to someone not involved), such as moving a character from one place to another it’s okay to TELL the reader. **“John traveled to Chicago.”** If nothing happens during the trip, don’t waste a chapter showing me the characters getting on the train, traveling across country, and arriving in Chicago. Remember, scenes that do not further or enhance the plot should be tucked away to use for inspiration on another project.

Using adverbs is tolerable within dialogue because we speak in passive voice already. Every author strives to make their dialogue sound natural, because that makes their characters sound real to the reader.

### **Examples & Exercises**

Using what we have discussed so far, read the paragraph below. Try to identify the mistakes that make the reading dull. Then, read my version of the same paragraph. After you have seen the difference, take a try at it yourself. I guarantee it will be different because all writers see the same event happening in a different manor.

#### **Paragraph #1**

At that exact moment another earthquake struck, this one even more powerful than the last. Will was thrown onto his back and the ground seemed to tip. He was powerless to stop his descent towards the mouth of the cave. Rocks broke away from the ceiling and rained down upon him. Suddenly he was tossed completely out of the cave, but was luckily able to grab onto the ledge as the earthquake subsided.

#### **Instructors Rewrite**



At that moment, another quake racked Will's world. The cave pivoted. His breath caught in his throat. The floor dropped away beneath him. He slammed hard onto the stone ground, scrambling for a handhold. With legs flailing, he slid toward the pit forming at his feet. Rocks rained down upon him from above. One struck him hard between the eyes, blurring his vision. Swinging his arms in a blind panic, he sought for anything to halt his decent into chasm opening beside him. He scrambled away from the pit on his hands and knee. Will lost his traction when the next tremor hit and the floor tilted toward the daylight outside. Rolling across the floor, he tumbled out the mouth of the cave into the open air beyond. Arms flapping, one hand struck an outcrop of rock. His fingers clamped onto the rough stone, halting his decent. Breathing hard with his eyes closed, he clung to the cliff wall. Nudging his eyelids open, tremors wracked his body seeing the ground so far away.

**Now, you take the paragraph and put it into your own words.**

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**Notes:**

### **Additional Exercises**

Mary walked slowly across along the path.

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The little girl on the park bench looked so sleepy, Mary felt sorry for her.

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From the way John behaved on the path, Mary could tell he was nervous about her reaction. She tried a few things to get him to calm down, and eventually she thought she had succeeded.

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**Notes:**