



SHOW ME, DON'T TELL ME

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As writers, we often hear the dictum, “Show, don’t tell.” But what does this phrase mean exactly? In a nutshell, *telling* is when the author informs the reader, and *showing* is when the writer involves the reader. Compare: “*She hung up the phone angrily*” with “*She slammed the phone against the wall with such force that it clattered against its cradle.*” In the first example, the audience is given no description as to what the action looks like, yet somehow we know that it was performed “angrily.” In the second, the writer describes the scene so thoroughly that we understand that the character is angry without needing to be told.

When a writer does not include enough detail in their writing, the audience may feel disconnected and lose interest. On the other hand, when the writer clouds their writing with too much detail, the meaning they were hoping to emphasize is lost. The trick is determining when *showing* is appropriate.

WHY *SHOWING* IS EFFECTIVE

According to Janet Burroway and Elizabeth Stuckey-French, authors of *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft*, effective fiction reaches its readers by reproducing “the emotional impact of an experience.”¹ In order to re-create an experience, a storyteller must provide adequate details that allow the reader to feel what the characters in the story are feeling. A writer could simply *tell* the reader what emotions the character is going through, and this would keep the audience informed. However, as any employer will say to you, knowledge is not the same as experience.

Consider this: it is one thing for a friend to *tell* you that the cake she bought is delicious. It is quite another for you to taste the cake yourself. When you experience a sensation, you are in the position to make a judgment. Is the cake truly delicious, or is your friend lying? Allowing readers to experience what is happening to your characters includes them in the story instead of just informing them.

1. Janet Burroway and Elizabeth Stuckey-French, *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Longman, 2007), 25.

APPEAL TO THE SENSES

In order to create an experience for your audience, you will need to supply them with concrete details. Burroway and Stuckey-French describe a detail as concrete when it “appeals to the senses.”² That is to say, describing what your character sees, hears, smells, tastes, and touches. Think back to elementary school, when you were asked to share an item with your class for “Show and Tell.” This was an exercise in describing objects using your senses. What does the object look like? Does it make a sound? Pass it around so everyone can feel it in their hands.

Think about what your characters might see, hear, smell, or touch in their day-to-day lives. They might not notice every little thing. The creaking floorboards of his mother’s front porch might be significant to Adam in that he listens for the squealing sounds while lying in bed at night—they signify his mother’s arrival home from her second job. But there is also the possibility that Adam is not the type of person who notices creaking floorboards, no matter how long he has lived in an old, weathered house, and so mentioning them has little impact. On the other hand, maybe the floorboards do ache, but Adam is so numb he no longer notices. Each example says something about the setting and the character.

SHOW THROUGH ACTION

Sensory detail is not the only way to *show* your reader. An action itself can also be used to describe the feelings, thoughts, or behavior of a character.

Let’s take a look at the following example:

Brittany was a flake who never listened to her parents and always left the house a mess.

The above passage lacks detail. The author is telling the audience what Brittany is like, rather than allowing the audience to decide for themselves.

What would happen if the author added a bit more detail?

Brittany was a flake who never listened to her parents and always left the house a mess. After an hour of scrubbing the bay windows, with a bucket over her shoulder and a stained washcloth in her hand, Brittany called her mother into the room. “I’m finished!” she said. Her mother wrinkled her nose at the faint streaks in the glass. “Didn’t I tell you not to use the dust rags?”

The passage is longer, but the audience now has more evidence to support their judgment. As it happens, Brittany might not be such a flake after all—the narrator might be a tad biased!

2. Janet Burroway and Elizabeth Stuckey-French, *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Longman, 2007), 27.

SIGNIFICANCE OF *SHOWING*

When writing descriptions, consider the significance behind the detail and what impact it has on your story. Just like how an artist does not need to use all of their paints to create a picture, a writer does not need to describe everything—only the details that “matter.”

Important details are those that provide sufficient evidence for the reader to make an accurate judgment about the character, setting, or situation. Your audience cannot determine that Jeff is a jerk just because he's blond, blue-eyed and approximately six-feet tall. But describing how Jeff kicks stray cats on his way home from school might steer your reader towards that judgment. So if you wanted to imply that Jeff is definitely the villain of your story, consider including significant details such as cat-kicking.

What if you don't want Jeff to be portrayed as a hero or a villain, but just a guy occupying a gray area? You must still provide adequate detail. Even if you don't want to define your characters by an archetype, you still want your audience to care about them. That's what keeps your readers involved. You, the writer, are the lawyer, and your audience is the jury. You must make a convincing argument for your characters using sufficient evidence to persuade your reader that your character is truly “good,” or “clumsy,” or “boring.”

WHEN TO *SHOW*, WHEN TO *TELL*

What happens when our writing is nothing but description? Then our audience is in danger of a sensory overload. When every action in the story is awash in detail, the significance of any one scene is lost. At some point in the story, the author is going to need to tell.

Remember the first example with the phone? Well, what if the character was not angry, or what if her feelings about the phone call were not necessary to note? If that were the case, then it would not make much sense to waste words describing the simple act of hanging up a telephone. This is an instance when an author would want to *tell* what happened rather than *show*.

Some authors recommend *showing* only the important or exciting parts in the story, and *telling* the rest. This way, your reader is involved in all the crucial moments without having to drag through the descriptions of dull or transitional chapters. Another method is *showing* when you want to evoke a certain thought or feeling in your audience. You may not want your reader to be an emotional mess throughout the entire story, but there may be parts where you hope they'll shed a few tears. Emphasize these parts of your writing by appealing to your reader's empathy.

Never forget that as a writer, the impact your story has on a reader is largely up to you. Different readers may interpret the same text differently. *Show* them what you mean.

WORKS CITED

Burroway, Janet and Elizabeth Stuckey-French. *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft*. Upper Sadle River, NJ: Pearson Longman, 2007.