

Show Your Story, Don't Tell It!

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The Big Question

What does this do for my 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 does not mean it will 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

Since the dawn of literature, writers have been told to show, not tell. So, why is this such a hard concept for new writers?

It's all about Immersion.

Creative writing should forge an emotional bond between the reader and what is being read. A great piece of fiction can operate at a high “intellectual” level, but without drawing the reader in with something that speaks to them on a “visceral” level, the reader will not be moved by the greater ideas behind the story.

The definition of Tell

–*verb*

to give an account or narrative of; narrate; relate

It's like watching a movie with a narrative voice-over.

Think of any nature show where you are watching an animal hunt and a voice from off camera is telling you what the animal is doing and thinking.

The definition of Show

–*verb*

to cause or allow to be seen

This is like watching a movie or a play and letting the actors demonstrate their feelings and emotions. The characters in your story ARE YOUR ACTORS! Let them act. Let them show the reader what is happening. Do not be that narrative voice off camera that is telling the reader what is going on.

On screen, you watch as a man falls to his knees next to the body of his dead son who was just struck by a car. Tears roll down his face as he gently lifts the boy's lifeless form and cradles it to his chest. He screams, sobs wracking his frame as he wipes blood from the dead boy's tangled hair. Continuing to weep, he pulls the boy's head into his chest, burying his face into his son's neck. You, the viewer, are moved to tears as the actor acts out the pain he is feeling over the loss that he is experiencing. You don't need me to step out next to him and say, "This man feels pain over the loss of his son." You can see that for yourself.

The basic difference between telling and showing is that with telling the writer is merely cataloging actions, feelings, and emotions. Showing paints an image that allows the reader's imagination to create a scene and place the reader in the middle of it.

It is the difference between the laundry list and the laundry.

How do we accomplish this? With Drake's six-steps to a more Showy Writing Style, of course!

Step One - Use Stronger Verbs

One way to show, as opposed to tell, is to use stronger verbs. With a stronger verb, your words carry more weight and reach the reader on a deeper level.

John hit the wall.

Hit is a weak verb. The English language is full of words much stronger. Words that will invoke a deeper response from the reader.

John struck the wall.

John bashed the wall.

John beat the wall.

John walloped the wall.

John whacked the wall.

John smashed the wall.

All stronger verbs than hit. Each conveying a slightly different image in the reader's mind. It is up to you, the writer, to pick the one that conveys your message in the manner you want.

You do, however, want to avoid being a thesaurus. Our job is to take the reader from their dreadful life and let them escape into another reality. If they are forced to use a dictionary every few sentences to get the meaning of what we are trying to say, it becomes just plain ole annoying. The reader will put the book down, move to something else and recommend to their friends to skip reading your book.

Make sure your strong verbs are relevant and fit with the story.

John percussed the wall.

While percussed is an actual word, and by definition technically fits this sentence, it is an odd word to use here and it will pull the reader out of the story.

Step Two – Let the reader feel it. Don't tell the reader what to feel.

Emotions are the fertile ground in which to “sow the show.” Unfortunately, it is easy to slip into telling. Emotions and events are the way to the reader's heart. If you can immerse the reader into the feelings and emotions of your characters, and the events taking place around them, your job as an author is more than half-done.

Emotions

(The monster jumped from the bushes and) John was scared.

Now, scared is a weak verb. And, since we just discussed using stronger verbs, let's replace it with something better.

(The monster jumped from the bushes and) John was terrified.

To be fair, “was” is weak helping verb. You should take any opportunity you get to replace the word “was” throughout your manuscript. Let's replace the “was” as well.

(The monster jumped from the bushes and) John felt terrified.

In the above example, we are telling the reader how John feels – scared/frightened/terrified. But it is unlikely that the reader feels any of the fear that John is feeling. We have not given the reader any reason to relate to John at all. Let's re-work this into a more showy sentence.

(As the monster jumped from the bushes), terror washed over John, draining the blood from his face.

Now, instead of telling the reader what John is feeling, we are showing them the fear within John. Taking it a step further, let us “show” the first part of the sentence as well.

As the monster pounced from the depths of the dark bushes, it landed in a crouch in the middle of the path. A vicious snarl ripped from its gaping maw. An acidic drool dripped from between its knife-like fangs. Terror washed over John, draining the blood from his face.

Both examples let the reader know that John is scared. But, unlike the first, the second creates a distinct picture in the reader's imagination. It also connects the reader to John, immersing them deeper into the story.

Another thing you may notice is that we added words, or “word count” as we call it in the “biz.” Yes, showing will add word count. But you are looking for a bang for your narrative buck. I would rather write a 160,000 word immersive showy masterpiece and struggle with how to cut 30,000 words from it than to write a 130,000 telly piece of garbage that will never get published. How about you?

Events

An easy way to grasp if you are telling instead of showing is by looking at the words you are using. Do the words tell the reader how they should react to the event? If so, you are telling.

Then, in a totally unexpected move, the monster jumped at John.

With the phrase, “in a totally unexpected move,” we are telling the reader that John is surprised by what the monster is doing. Let’s look at this another way.

John took another step back, and again the monster did not move. Letting out a shuddered breath, he forced himself to calm down. *I just need to keep moving away and I’ll be fine*, he thought. Shock stabbed into him as the creature lunged, claws bared.

In this example, the reader is shown that John is surprised. Again, it adds word count. But it is a much more immersive read.

Step Three – Let the reader see it. Don’t tell the reader what they see.

Showing is also about eliminating ambiguity and vagueness within your narrative. A writer needs to paint a picture. If you assume the reader knows what you mean, you make an “ass” out of “u” and “me” as the old saying goes.

There was an old shack sitting in the backyard.

Nothing wrong with this sentence for the most part. But, is your definition of an old shack the same as mine? I doubt it.

An old shack slumped in the backyard like a broken weed, its pale white paint faded and flaking. The door hung limp on its hinges, swinging in the gentle breeze.

Now, with the second example, both the reader and I are on the same page. We both know exactly what that old shack looks like.

Step Four – Let your dialogue “speak”

Dialogue in a novel is not simply your characters talking to each other. It is a way for the writer to show more of their story. It gives insight into your characters.

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

“Once again I had to cover for my imbecile boss. But I couldn’t let the thing go forward his way. It would have cost the company millions! I just wish I could tell the board and not feel guilty about ruining his career.”

In both of the above, I have given you absolutely no description about who said the lines of dialogue. You don’t know who they are, what race they are, or even if they are male or female. But in each, from the dialogue alone, you can see many qualities and traits of the character speaking.

Step Five – Let the reader here it. Don't tell the reader what they hear.

Speech tags can be useful tools for showing rather than telling your story. Unfortunately, most people use them as tells.

"Let's go," John said anxiously.

"Let's go," John said, trying to glance in all directions at once.

The first line merely tells the reader that John is anxious. By replacing the adverb with an action, you show the reader that John is anxious.

One word of caution, however. In today's literary market, more and more agents and acquisition editors are frowning at speech tags that include anything that does not refer directly to speaking. As in, he said, they screamed, she thought. 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 you will be called on it since the sentence is stronger.

Step Six – Kill the adverbs.

The above is an example of another common mistake: using adverbs. But, adverbs are not just found in speech tags. Oh, no my friends. All writers, "especially" new ones, tend to "radically" overuse adverbs. "Luckily", most adverbs are "easily" trimmed from your "lovingly" constructed manuscript.

For, most adverbs are "simply" redundant and not needed in the sentence.

"BE QUIET!" John screamed loudly.

First off, the capital letters and exclamation point let me know the dialogue was said in a loud tone of voice. So adding the speech tag of "screamed" is redundant. Still, adding the adverb "loudly" onto the speech tag is just plain silly. How else can someone scream? Can a person scream quietly? Can they scream softly?

Let's look at a few more examples of redundant adverbs.

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

Again, there is no way to race other than quickly. Removing the "quickly" from the sentence does not change the sentence one bit.

Keeping low, John raced to the other side of the room.

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

Really? Is there a chance that some reader will read this sentence and wonder if John left a leg or an arm inside the plane when he was thrown out? I doubt it.

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

Look for adverbs within your manuscript that you can cut without changing the sentence.

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

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

Do you really need the “totally” or the “completely”? Do they add to the story? Strengthen the sentence? No. They just add words, and weak ones at that.

Knowing the boy was exceptionally smart, John expected no less from him.
Vs.

Knowing the boy was smart, John expected no less from him.

Again, the “exceptionally” is not needed. If you want to stress the brains of the boy, use a stronger verb! This will stress the intelligence of the boy, while not falling back on a weak writing style.

Knowing the boy was brilliant, John expected no less from him.

It is O.K. to tell... sometimes

Keep in mind, writing is a balancing act. A novel that is one big “show” might be the worst thing ever written. There are times when you may need to tell.

If one character is telling another something the reader has already read, you would not want to “show” the character telling the tale again. Using a sentence like, *Then, John told Mary of the monster attack.* will suffice and move the story forward.

If the reader needs to know something, but not the details, such as moving the characters from one place to another. “*They then 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. Just get me there and continue with the story.

Putting it all together

Example One

Slowly Martin stood, wary that the monster could still attack, but when it faltered again he charged and planted the butt of the fire extinguisher down onto the remaining part of the creature's head, flattening it with a sickening squish of cartilage and spray of grayish purple blood.

After delivering the lethal blow Martin stumbled backward to watch nervously, half expecting it to jump backup and attack again. Gradually its legs curled inward in the spidery embrace of its own demise and when Martin was finally satisfied that the creature was truly deceased he sighed heavily and turned to his patient, hoping that it wasn't too late.

Drake's Rewrite

Knowing the monster could still strike him dead with a single blow, Martin rose to his feet. He held the fire extinguisher out in front of him, as if the tiny red tube could protect him from the beast. A tentacle lashed out, falling short as the injured monster stumbled closer. Fear gripped Martin like a vice and it was a struggle for him to do anything other than gape at the beast. Gritting his teeth, Martin lunged. With the full force of his weight behind it, he slammed the butt of the extinguisher down onto the still smoldering head of the monster. A sickening sound, like a soaking wet towel falling to a tiled floor, echoed through the small laboratory. A spray of grayish-purple blood, spackled with what looked like cartilage, sprayed into the air.

As the monster crumpled to the floor, Simon staggered back, amazed that he still lived. The thing's tentacles curled in upon themselves, much like a spider's would in the throws of death. Breathing hard, still fearful that the monster was not dead, Simon stood clutching the fire extinguisher to his chest. His eyes remained locked on the horror in front of him. After what felt like an eternity, he let out a shuddered breath and lowered his make-shift weapon. Glancing across the room to his patient, he skirted the corpse on the floor and rushed to the gurney. Looking down at Genevieve's pale face, he hoped he was too late.

Example Two

At that exact moment another earthquake struck, this one even more powerful than the last. Bob 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.

Drake' Rewrite

At the same moment, another quake racked the world. The cave pivoted, and Bob's breath caught in his throat as the floor dropped away beneath him. Slamming hard onto the stone ground, terror ripped through him with the realization that he was sliding toward the mouth of the cave. Rocks broke away from above, raining down upon him. One struck him hard between the eyes, blurring his vision. Stretching out his arms in a blind panic, he sought for anything that would halt his decent into the vast openness awaiting him. Like a bullet, he shot from the mouth of the cave, tumbling into the open air beyond. Arms flailing, one hand struck an outcrop of rock. His fingers clamped onto the rough stone in a death grip, halting his decent. Breathing hard, he clung to the cliff wall with his eyes closed. Tremors rolled through him as the reality of what happened washed over him.

Exercises

John walked slowly across the room.

The little girl looked so sleepy, John felt sorry for her.

From the way John behaved in the crowded restaurant, you could tell he was attracted to the cute waitress in the black skirt. He tried a few things to get her attention, and eventually he thought he succeeded.

End

Thank you for your time and attention. I hope you found it informative.

If you would do me a favor, please visit <http://www.meetup.com/Las-Vegas-Creative-Writing-Class/> and review my teaching and this class. It would be a tremendous help to me.

DRAKE