

Show, Don't Tell

The single best piece of advice you can receive to become a better writer is "Show me, don't tell me." **Show, Don't Tell** is an important rule when it comes to writing. It is the magic technique that breathes life and energy into any story. Don't *tell* me the character is angry; *show* me that the character is angry. Don't *tell* me that the character had a good time at the party; *show* me how the character had a good time. Yeah, that sounds easy, but what, exactly, does **show** and **tell** mean?

Telling sentences tell us something. They give information but it is general, non-specific, and often vague. Telling sentences leave out the action, emotion, and sensory details—all the vital ingredients that make the reader believe in your story.

Showing sentences show us – they describe the scenes and actions; they help us see by using clear, specific details to create clear, strong pictures in our minds. A showing sentence has a different “sound” and “feeling” when you read it. They “show” information through the use of action, dialogue, and the five senses.

Take a look at the following examples.

1. **Telling sentence:** Jack was afraid.

Showing sentence: As the footsteps tapped closer and closer, Jack felt his stomach muscles tighten. He flattened himself to the wall, the gritty bricks against his cheek. Sweat chilled his palms. He used both hands to steady the gun.

So what is the secret to “showing” a scene?

It's simple - use specific details. Specific details breathe life into your story and activate the reader's imagination so he can become a part of it. Watch out whenever you name an emotion, such as Jack was afraid. It's lazy writing. How much better it is to “**show**” the emotion through action, the five senses, and dialogue.

2. **Telling sentence:** It was very dark inside.

Showing sentence: I held my hand in front of my eyes but couldn't see its outline. The walls were invisible and it was impossible to see the bottom of the steep stairs.

3. **Telling sentence:** The pizza was delicious.

Showing sentence: Mushrooms and pepperoni sausage were layered thickly on top of one another while the white mozzarella cheese bubbled over the bright red tomato sauce.

4. Telling sentence: The weather was bad.

Showing sentence: A harsh wind whipped through the trees. Dark clouds poured buckets of rain that overran the gutters and spilled onto the sidewalks.

5. Telling sentence: I was really mad.

Showing sentence: I ran to the door, threw it open with a loud bang against the wall, and yelled, “Get in this house right this minute! You are three hours late!”

Practice - Pick 2 sentences to change from “tell” sentences to “show” sentences below.

1. The party was great.
2. My room is a mess.
3. I made a cool jump.
4. He was shy.
5. The children are having fun.
6. It was a nice fall day.
7. The old woman was lonely.
8. The car was old.
9. I love that class.
10. She was embarrassed.

Step back and imagine the scene yourself. What sounds do you hear? What smells are in the air? What expression does the character have on his/her face? What are his/her motivations? We need details. We need to know thoughts, feelings; we need to see, hear, feel, smell and taste your story.

This image shows a blank sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.