Show, Don’t Tell

The first rule of writing is to write what you know. It is nearly impossible to write well about something which you know nothing about or are not interested in. When choosing a writing topic, always choose something that you know at least a little about, are interested in, and want to explore more.

Once you actually begin working, the second rule of writing is to show, don’t tell. It means exactly what it says: show your reader through your words what you want them to see, don’t just tell them about it. Telling communicates just facts, general statements, and basic ideas to a reader, while showing invites understanding.

For example, telling might look like this: My faithful dog sleeps on the couch while I work.

However, showing would sound more like this: She follows me dutifully up the narrow stairs to my attic office, as she does every morning when I get up to work. When I sit down at the computer, she wanders sleepily around the room for a few moments, a little unsteady on her feet, searching for the warmest, cushiest place to collapse. Finally, every morning, she finally shuffles towards the orange futon in the corner—the only piece of furniture she is allowed to lay on—eyes me questioningly, and then one paw at a time climbs onto it. Turning around and around, she beats down a nook for herself in the layers of blankets and then lowers herself carefully, wiggles into place, takes one last glance at me to make sure that I have settled in at my desk, closes her eyes and sighs in that boxer way, jowls flapping softly with her exhale. A moment later, I hear the quiet, familiar rumble of her snore. As long as she is assured that I am nearby, she can relax.

If you tell a reader something, your statement might not be memorable. If you show them so that they can see it with their own eyes, they are more likely to remember, and more importantly, believe it. Writing is powerful when it appeals to a reader’s senses—sight, hearing, taste, smell, and feeling—and when it includes specific details and examples that create a scene and make vivid comparisons.

Diction/Word Choices—showing vs. telling has everything to do with DICTION or WORD CHOICES. Some things to consider when revising your writing to show rather than tell include the following.

Monosyllabic vs. Multisyllabic Words—in other words, one-syllable words vs. words with many syllables. Lots of one-syllable words can make your writing sound more direct and clear and more personal. Lots of multisyllabic words make your writing sound more intellectual and formal. So, you need to ask yourself how personal and informal or intellectual and formal do you want to sound?

Specific vs. General Words—specific words refer to particular persons, places, or events: Martin Luther King, Jr., Manhattan, New York City, the 2008 Olympic Games in Beijing. General words, on the other hand, refer to groups or classes: civil rights activists, a big city, competitive sports, athletes. General words can cause your writing to be unclear and boring; specific words and details make your writing sound more informed. However, too much of either can also cause problems. Too much general language will cause your reader to ask What do you mean? Can you give an example? Too many specific words can cause your reader to get bored if you focus on too many details that don’t help to explain meaning or importance of what you’re writing about.

Concrete vs. Abstract Words—concrete words are ones that can be perceived by our senses: sound, smell, touch, taste, hearing. Abstract words refer to things that we cannot detect with our senses; they refer to qualities and ideas. The more abstract writing is, the harder it is to understand. (Writers often use abstract language when they are addressing an educated audience.)

Literal vs. Figurative Language—literal and figurative language refer to comparisons. Comparisons can give your writing energy and really show what you mean. A literal comparison would be Private colleges are smaller in size than public universities. Figurative comparisons are either metaphors or similes. A metaphor implies a comparison of two things: Our
A simile compares two things using the words like or as: The stars were as close as berries on a bush or I tend to go through life like a vacuum cleaner, inhaling all the interesting tidbits in my path.

**Other Strategies to Consider**—some strategies to help you learn to show, don’t tell include using specific nouns; strong, descriptive verbs; and evocative adjectives and adverbs.

Example sentence: "The woman pet the dog."

1. **Nouns.** You’ll feel quite differently about the woman if I call her a "businesswoman," a "young mother," or an "old hag." Likewise, "dog" calls up quite a different mental image if I change it to a "mutt," a "boxer," or "her faithful French bulldog." Always be specific when you name things, and pay attention to the mental images each name creates.

2. **Verbs.** "Pet" is okay for communicating action, but "stroked," "tousled," or "gently caressed" are a lot better and more specific. When you write descriptive verbs, go for the unexpected. How do we feel about a hag who gently strokes the French bulldog at her feet, or the businesswoman who tousles a mutt's ears when no one is looking? When you show rather than tell, you’ll find a thousand opportunities to create meanings and character.

3. **Adjectives and Adverbs.** Adjectives add a lot to one’s writing. Is the woman beautiful? Is the dog ugly? Is her hand shaking? Is the dog whimpering? Adverbs, on the other hand, should be used sparingly (especially "empty" adverbs like "really" and "very"). If your verbs are strong enough, you won’t need them. A few well-placed adverbs can help to create a scene though.

**Example**

### Telling:

I'll never forget how I felt after Ali died. I was miserable.

Simply naming the feelings that you experienced (telling your reader what you felt) is not enough to create interest in the reader. You need to find a way to generate, in your reader, the same feelings that you experienced.

### Better, But Still Telling:

*If I live for a thousand years,* I'll never forget how *utterly and terribly alone* I felt after Ali died. I was *so* miserable that I thought I would die. Months and months went by, and it seemed that every little thing reminded me of her and made me wish things could be different. I don’t know whether I am ever going to get over her death.

While the author has added details, those details merely assist the telling — they don’t actually give the reader a reason to love Bear, and to suffer along with the writer.

### Showing:

Whenever puppies in the pet store window distracted me from the serious business of taking her for her walk, Ali snarled fiercely and pulled mightily at her leash yet she always forgave me instantly. Over the past few years she lost her hearing and her sight, but when she felt the leash click on her collar and smelled fresh air, she still began to tremble and frolic about. She’s been dead for three months now. This morning I filled her water bowl all the way to the top — just the way she likes it — before I remembered.

The author does not need to tell the reader "I loved Ali and I still haven’t come to terms with her death," because the paragraph contains specific details that show the depth of the relationship.