Showing vs. Telling

We have all read that book, essay, or story in our lives that really engaged us—writing that challenges, evokes strong emotion, and gives a clear, rich picture of the events being described. When we are reading this kind of writing, we are seeing the effect that showing rather than telling can have on the overall purpose and effectiveness of a piece of writing.

In order to convince, entertain, inform, or simply engage your audience in writing, it is important to not simply impart—or tell—they the facts, details, events, arguments or otherwise in the course of a paper. Rather, it is better to show the audience these important aspects of the paper through vivid sensory detail, informative description, and symbolic language.

Now, this is not to say that there is no place in writing for telling. In fact, depending on the situation and purpose for the writing, it could be better to tell the simple details of the event rather than spend more time on the less important details surrounding the event. It is up to the writer to determine how much showing vs. telling is needed in any given writing task.

Here are 5 helpful hints to help you show in your writing:

**5 Helpful Hints for revising writing to “Show” rather than “Tell”**

1. Choose specific details that show your point

   **Original sentence:** The little girl looked so tired, she clearly needed a nap.

   This sentence gets to the point, but it is not engaging the imagination of the reader. In order to strengthen the image in the reader’s mind, there should be some more specific detail included about the scene being portrayed.

   **Revised:** Her sleepy brown eyes hardened into red-rimmed slits. She cocked her plastic Viking helmet aggressively, the horns sticking out only a little more than her curls. One fist clutched a decapitated lollipop, the other a cardboard sword. I knew we were headed for a battle when she leveled the point at my chest. “You mean dragon!” she growled. “You’ll never make me nap!”

   Now the scene is established a little better using the details regarding the physical look of the character and the motive of the speaker (“I knew we were headed for a battle…”). With these changes, the audience is presented with vivid details like the Viking hat, as well as the idea that they’re about to face a temper tantrum. All these important details allow the audience to understand the situation better, and make assumptions and evaluations of the scene and the characters in it.
2. Give the Reader a Reason to Feel Your Emotions

**Original Sentence:** I’ll never forget how I felt after Fido died. I was miserable.

Simply naming the feelings that you experience is not enough to create interest in the reader. It is important instead to attempt to generate the feelings in the reader that you’d like to impart. This is also known as establishing Tone.

**Revised:** Whenever puppies in the pet store window distracted me from our walk, Fido flattened his scruffy ears, growling. But he always forgave me. As his sight faded, the smell of fresh air and the feel of grass would make him try to bound through the yard, even though his legs wouldn’t let him. This morning, I filled his water bowl all the way to the top—just the way he likes it—before I remembered.

The author clearly portrays the relationship between the owner and his dog, the caring and tenderness to their dynamic, the evolution of emotional investment in the speaker, and the feeling of hopelessness and loss at the dog’s death as symbolized by filling the dog bowl.

3. Encourage the Reader’s Involvement: Show Details that Imply the Main Point

**Original Sentence:** From the way she behaved in the crowded restaurant, you could tell Sally was attracted to the cute stranger in the black shirt. She tried a few things to get his attention, and eventually she thought she succeeded.

Although the events of the story are very clear, they are thin and leave the audience with not much to cling to in terms of visual and plot detail.

**Revised:** That stranger had been scanning the room, and this time, Sally thought his eyes flickered in her direction. Wait—was that a half smile? Had he just put his hand on his heart? Or was he just brushing something off of his shirt? That shirt looked soft. Sally smiled. “He’s kind of cute,” her roommate giggled. Sally casually looked away, twirling a curl. “Oh, I don’t know,” she said, letting her eyes rest on the artwork, the flowers, a random face in the crowd, and found another excuse to laugh. Carefully turning her profile, she crossed her legs like her friends had practiced in middle school. That ought to do it, she thought.

Even though this is a large departure from the original, and the purposes for each action are left somewhat unclear, the audience is invited to engage with the thoughts and actions of Sally. The inclusion of dialogue, inner thoughts, and subtle character actions (“twirling a curl” and “she crossed her legs”) go a long way to draw in the audience and incite their questions and interest.

4. “Telling” states facts or observations. “Showing” invites deeper understanding.

**Original:** All the kids knew that Lucinda was the meanest kid in the third grade. She was prissy and cute, and she thought that meant she could get away with anything. She would always go out of her way to torment me. I wasn’t one of the “cool” kids, and the few kids I knew were just the guys I played chess with during recess—they weren’t really friends. Plus, I was clumsy. So I was a good target. She tormented me so much she made the third grade a living hell.

Here the audience really has to take it on faith that Lucinda was mean to the author. The audience doesn’t see Lucinda do anything mean, so how do they know it’s not just the author being whiny about his lack of friends and social weakness? There’s not enough information for the audience to know the whole story.
Revised: When the recess bell rang, I grabbed my chess set and dashed to freedom, eager to win the daily tournament of outcasts. I didn’t look, but I knew Lucinda was watching. I could feel her curls swaying as her head tracked me. Of course, I tripped in the doorway. Tennis shoes and sandals stepped around me as I scrambled after pawn and bishops. And there was Lucinda, waiting for me to notice her. She smiled, lifted her shiny patent-leather shoe, and slowly, carefully ground her heel right on the head of my white queen.

Here is a very detailed account of Lucinda’s terrorizing behavior. There are details that give us insight into her choice to terrorize the narrator—including Lucinda’s choice to wait for the author to notice her before breaking the queen—as well as sensory detail that gives a vivid image of the scene. Also, rather than including more telling information like “I was clumsy” and “I wasn’t one of the cool kids,” the actions of the scene (“I tripped…” and “…stepped around me”) show those details about the narrator’s character.

5. Showing Favors the Specific to the General.

Original Sentence: Clearly, something must be done about this terrible crisis

“Clearly” is a good signpost in showing vs. telling. It is often a signal that the author isn’t sure the point that follows is persuasive enough. It signifies an assumption of understanding about the intended audience, which is dangerous in writing. Rather than expecting your audience to believe you, it is better to present evidence—usually in the form of vivid examples—that lead the reader to conclude, on his or her own, that this thing is terrible.

Possible questions to answer in revision:

- What, specifically, about the crisis makes it terrible?
- How do you define “terrible?”
- What must be done?

Original Sentence: He looked at me in a way that wasn’t exactly threatening, but still made me uncomfortable.

This is classic telling. It states something that happened, and succinctly describes the effect it had on the author. What, exactly, did the guy do with his eyes, face, and body that made you uncomfortable? Describe the actions in a way that shows the reader exactly what made you uncomfortable.

Possible questions to answer in revision:

- Did he waggle his eyebrows at you in a vaguely sensual manner?
- Did he stare at you while taking a gigantic bite out a chicken wing?
- Did he track you as you walked by, mouth slightly agape, then look away swiftly when your eyes met his, only to look back when you glanced away?

Ultimately, great showing in writing includes a nuanced interaction between each one of these 5 strategies. In fact, it takes significant dedication and experience in writing to seamlessly weave the different styles of showing throughout prose. However, writers at all levels can greatly benefit from these techniques, and by utilizing any one—or multiple—of them in your own writing it will help you more effectively engage, entertain, and persuade your audience.