

“...every great writer does considerable TELLING along with SHOWING. SHOWING--that is, rendering sensation in detail--takes a lot of space. [...] TELLING can be efficient, crisp, and [...] evocative. It's a way of summarizing.”

Jerome Sterns, *Making Shapely Fiction*

SHOWING

Also referred to as SCENE, SHOWING expands details and describes them across a large space on the page. This technique is essential for describing significant details and events, because SHOWING allows the reader to experience the scene along with the narrator.

Many writers, however, experience frustration when trying to understand the process of SHOWING. In the following example, Tim O'Brien uses significant detail in his short story “On the Rainy River,” to SHOW instead of TELL.

For ten or fifteen minutes Elroy held a course upstream, the river choppy and silver-gray, then he turned straight north and put the engine on full throttle. I felt the bow lift beneath me. I remember the wind in my ears, the sound of the old outboard Evinrude. For a time I didn't pay attention to anything, just feeling the cold spray against my face, but then it occurred to me that at some point we must've passed into Canadian waters ... Elroy cut the engine, letting the boat fishtail lightly about twenty yards off shore. The old man didn't look at me or speak. Bending down, he opened up his tackle box and busied himself with a bobber and a piece of wire leader, humming to himself, his eyes down.

To better understand the technique of showing, here is an example of how O'Brien may have written this passage if he were TELLING:

Elroy drove the boat for fifteen minutes until we reached Canadian waters. He cut the engine and began fishing.

The difference between these two passages is the use of significant detail. That is, sensory and concrete details that play a part in building an important scene with an emotion the writer is trying to convey. In the TELLING example, readers are not given descriptions of the water, or how the narrator felt the boat move. By giving these specific details, readers are pulled into the scene, not just given a generalized overview of what happened.

SHOWING TECHNIQUES

- BODY LANGUAGE

At the rear of the boat Elroy Berdahl pretended not to notice. He held a fishing rod in his hands, his head bowed to hide his eyes. He kept humming a soft, monotonous little tune.

- DIALOGUE

“Dinner at five-thirty,” he said. “You eat fish?”
“Anything,” I said.
Elroy grunted and said, “I'll bet.”

- THOUGHT (TYPICALLY ITALICIZED)

Courage, I seemed to think, *comes to us in finite quantities...*

- SENSORY DETAILS

...the river choppy and silver-gray... feeling the cold spray against my face...

- AVOID FILTERING

I watched the cat pounce from the fence railing into the shrubs. *I heard* it meow.

vs.

The cat pounces from the fence railing into the shrubs. It meows.*

*Writers can avoid “I think,” “I saw,” “I heard,” etc., because readers will assume any action/description written is occurring from the narrator's perspective.

FOR ACADEMIC PAPERS:

While the concept of **SHOWING** v. **TELLING** is often used in narrative essays, it can also creatively supplement academic writing, such as research papers or reports.

TELLING in academic papers is summarizing information quickly. It allows writers to move concisely between varying ideas, acting much like an outline to guide the reader from point A to point B.

SHOWING involves details that help build on these points, giving the reader more cues for understanding the content. Moments of **SHOWING** can also add a human element to factual essays. For instance, if the writer is reporting on a medical disease, she/he might use an example of a case study. Including a description of how this disease has affected the individual's life would further support the essay and give context for the writer's facts.

TELLING

Also referred to as **SUMMARY**, this technique takes details (or revealing information) and describes it in a small space on the page. While **SHOWING** is recommended for significant scenes and details, **TELLING** has an important place in narrative and academic writing because it is concise. **SHOWING** fills the space on the page with intimate details. If this is the only style the writer uses, the reader is likely to feel overwhelmed with details that may not seem significant. **TELLING** between significant portions of showing helps transition the reader and give them a stronger sense of what the writer wants noticed, and what the reader can just accept as simple information. **TELLING** only becomes an issue when the writer uses it in excess.

The following is an opening from the short fiction piece, "Bullet to the Brain" by Tobias Wolff. In these first few opening lines, Wolff uses **TELLING** to pull readers into the setting, give them a sense of character, and begin creating atmosphere:

Anders couldn't get to the bank until just before it closed, so of course the line was endless and he got stuck behind two women whose loud, stupid conversation put him in a murderous temper. He was never in the best of tempers anyway, Anders--a book critic known for the weary, elegant savagery with which he dispatched almost everything he reviewed.

TELLING, while not overused, can be well-written and complimentary to the piece of writing as a whole.

SHOWING V. TELLING

SHOWING/SCENE: details and information described across a large space on the page

TELLING/SUMMARY: details and information described across a small space on the page

QUESTIONS FOR THE WRITER

- What are the important scenes? Do you summarize or show them?
- Are there any places that require more sensory details, body language, thought, dialogue, etc?
- For the scenes where you use **TELLING**, is it appropriate? Would the scene have more impact if you used showing? (It's okay if the answer is no, as long as you can justify your choices.)
- For the scenes where you use **SHOWING**, do they have a significant purpose? Such as building character, emotions, or the narrative plot? If the scene is not significant, would **SUMMARIZING** be more appropriate?
- Can the reader "see" what is happening or do they just "know" what is happening?