

SHOWING vs. TELLING

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One of the most frustrating aspects of receiving a writing critique can be when someone highlights a line of your work and next to it scrawls, “Show, don’t tell” without offering a suggestion for improvement. 😊

Many writers run into the problem of “Telling” instead of “Showing” because it’s difficult to put yourself into the mind of the reader, but that’s exactly what you need to do to keep the reader engaged. So what’s the difference and how can you avoid this?

At a recent writing workshop, someone made the point that the difference can be described as watching a movie (Showing) or having the plot of the movie recounted to you by someone who has seen it (Telling).

Telling keeps the reader at arms’ length, while **showing** puts the reader in the middle of the story and lets them experience the action through the eyes of the character. **Showing** also makes your story more believable and helps the reader identify with and make an emotional connection to what’s going on.



Your readers are investing their time and have an emotional stake in your work when they decide to read your book. Fiction readers also have expectations that an author will take them to another world, create believable and sympathetic characters, and illustrate enough conflict so they continue to turn to the next page.



A brief history: (ideas from Self Editing for Fiction Writers) Years ago, narrative summary (**telling**) was an accepted form of literature. Thanks to the influence of movies and television and, more recently, the Internet, readers today want to “see” stories as a series of immediate scenes. Narrative summary no longer engages the modern reader.

(page 4 from SEFFW) One of the easiest ways to look like an amateur is to use mechanics that call attention to themselves and away from your story. You want your readers to be so wrapped up in your story that they are not even aware the author exists. But when you switch to narrative summary-especially if you go on at length-it can sometimes seem as if you were breaking into the story to give your readers a lecture. And there is no quicker way to turn readers off than to lecture them.

RUE: Resist the Urge to Explain- (page 9 from SEFFW) *The tendency to describe a character’s emotion may reflect a lack of confidence on the part of the author. And more often than not, authors tell their readers things already shown by dialogue and action- it’s as if they’re repeating themselves to make sure their readers get the point.*



When is it ok to use narrative summary? Often a story calls for exposition- giving background about a characters’ past, events that occurred before the story began, or other information that your reader needs to know in order to understand your plot. Typically, this can be done through scene construction and revealing important information to the reader as the story unfolds, but some genres-such as Historical and Science Fiction – require exposition to a certain extent.

(From The Complete Idiots Guide to Grammar and Style): Don’t add detail merely to pad your writing, because that results in bloated, awkward sentences....Ask yourself four questions: What am I trying to say? What words will express it? What images will make it clearer? Is this image fresh enough to have an effect?



You can have style without **showing**. You can even be masterful with supporting details, and still only be **telling** the story. ☺