Show, Don't Tell

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By Erin

Anyone who's ever written a short story or taken a freshman composition course has heard the words "show, don't tell."

I know those words can be frustrating. You might not know exactly what "show, don't tell" means. Or you might believe that you *are* showing when you're really telling.

While "telling" can be useful, even necessary, most people don't realize how vital "showing" is to an effective story, essay, or even a blog post. Showing allows the reader to follow the author into the moment, to see and feel and experience what the author has experienced. Using the proper balance of showing and telling will make your writing more interesting and effective.

"Okay, I get it," you're thinking. "But how do I do it? How do I bring more 'showing' into my writing?"

I'm glad you asked. Here are some tips that will help make your writing more vivid and alive for your reader.

1. **Use dialogue**

This is probably one of the first things I talk to my students about when I have them write personal essays. Dialogue allows the reader to experience a scene as if they were there. Instead of telling the reader your mom was angry, they can hear it for themselves:

"Justin Michael," mom bellowed, "Get in here *this instant*!"

Dialogue can give your reader a great deal about character, emotion and mood.

2. **Use sensory language**

In order for readers to fully experience what you're writing about, they need to be able to see, hear, taste, smell and touch the world around them. Try to use language that incorporates several senses, not just sight.

3. **Be descriptive**

I'm sure everyone remembers learning to use adjectives and adverbs in elementary school. When we're told to be more descriptive, it's easy to go back to those things that we were taught. But being descriptive is more than just inserting a string of descriptive words. It's carefully choosing the *right* words and using them sparingly to convey your meaning.

The following example is from a short story I wrote.

Telling: He sits on the couch holding his guitar.

There's nothing wrong with that sentence. It gives the reader some basic information, but it doesn't create an image. Compare that sentence with this:

Showing: His eyes are closed, and he's cradling the guitar in his arms like a lover. It's as if he's trying to hold on to something that wants to let go.

The second example takes that basic information and paints a picture with it. It also uses *figurative language*—in

this case, the simile "cradling the guitar in his arms like a lover"—to help create an image.

When using description, it's important not to overdo it. Otherwise, you can end up with what I call "police blotter" description. For example:

He was tall, with brown hair and blue eyes. He wore a red shirt and jeans, and a brown leather jacket.

4. **Be specific, not vague**

This is another one I'm constantly reminding my college students about. Frequently, they will turn in essays with vague, fuzzy language. I'm not sure if they think this type of writing sounds more academic, but all it really does is frustrate the reader.

Instead of writing, "I had never felt anything like it before in my entire life," take the time to try and describe what that feeling was, and then decide how best to convey that feeling to the reader. Your readers will thank you for it.