

# How to "Show Don't Tell"

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## Equipping Writers for Success

### How to "Show Don't Tell"

by Dawn Copeman

Writing books always tell us that it is vital that we "show, don't tell," but then don't explain what that phrase actually means. So here's a beginner's guide to *Show, don't tell*.

*Show, don't tell.* means just what it says. Show the reader through your words what you want them to see; don't just tell them about it.

The idea is if you tell someone something, they might remember it and they might believe it -- or they might not. If you show them it so that they can see it in their own mind's eye, they are more likely to remember it and, more importantly, believe it.

#### How It Works

Look at these examples below of telling versus showing:

**Telling:** Mary wasn't a natural mother and she found the children very trying.

**Showing:** Mary couldn't believe it could be this much work. Couldn't they leave her alone for five minutes to read the paper? She'd put the cartoons on for them and given them crayons and paper, but apparently that wasn't enough -- they still wanted her.

Janet and John, her three year old twins looked angelic to other people -- with their curly blonde hair and blue eyes, oh yes they were the very picture of their mother -- but no-one else knew what they were like. Her children always, *always* wanted her attention.

She should be able to cope she told herself. She used to run a marketing department with twenty staff for heaven's sake, two children shouldn't be this much work. "*That's enough!*" she shouted. "Can't you just leave me *Alone?*"

She dragged the shocked and tearful children to their room and shut the door on them. "Mummy isn't playing anymore" she shouted through the door. "Mummy wanted just five minutes to read the paper, but you wouldn't let her -- now *you* can't watch the television -- I'll see you in *five minutes!*" As she slumped against the door she felt even worse. This wasn't how it was supposed to be.

In the second example, we can see what life is like for Mary, we can begin to understand her situation. In the *tell* example this information almost washes over us.

**Tell:** The ground floor, rented room was tiny, damp and obviously uncared for.

**Show:** "As he entered the room from the hallway the first thing he noticed was the fusty smell: a combination of mould, damp and stale cigarette smoke. There were snail trails across the worn, brown, cord carpet that covered what little floor space there was. Opposite the doorway, pushed up against the wall, was a single bed, covered with a duvet but no duvet cover and a flat, tobacco-stained pillow.

Squeezed into the corner of the room at the foot of the bed was a chest of drawers. On top of the drawers was a single electric hotplate. Opposite this was a sink piled high with dirty pots with a toothbrush just visible, peeking out through the handle of a mug. Facing the bed was a small table with a fold up-chair. On top of the table was an overflowing ashtray and yesterday's newspaper. Behind the door stood a mouldy wicker waste bin full of ash and cigarette ends."

In *tell* you get a fleeting glance of the room; in *show* you begin to see it.

Sometimes you can do a *half show-half tell*. This is where you get a character to describe another person -- that way they are showing and you're telling. "I'd be careful around him Cheryl, if I were you. He's a sly one that one, he can't be trusted."

Because a character has said it, it somehow makes it appear more real to the reader than if we'd just written "Tom was sly and couldn't be trusted."

## Show Don't Tell in Nonfiction

Although all these examples are from fiction, "show don't tell" is useful for nonfiction too.

**Tell:** "In Sweden Witches visit at Easter"

**Show:** "The bonfires had been lit. Fireworks danced across the sky and all around the village excited children dressed as witches were collecting sweets from their neighbors. They aren't trick or treating -- no, they're leaving their neighbors beautifully decorated letters in exchange for their sweets. For this isn't Halloween, this is how they celebrate Easter in Sweden."

You may have noticed that showing uses up a lot more words. This can be good in fiction, especially when writing a novel, but bad in nonfiction where word counts are tight and where you need to use "show, don't tell" more carefully. So use it in a hook or use it to set a scene, but don't overdo it -- you don't want to end up with a lot of purple prose!

## When to tell, not show!

If you *show don't tell* all the time, your word count will be way too high, and in a novel the reader may get bored of all the 'padding'. No-one wants to be able to see every part of every building or every scene that clearly.

So you *tell* the things that are of no real importance to the story but are necessary to move the story along.:

*"The doorbell rang."* Unless you're telling "A Christmas Carol" the type of doorbell is totally irrelevant and can be told not shown.

*"Mary picked up the remote control and turned the television back on."* Again, we don't need to know anything more about these things so telling will suffice.

Basically, *show, don't tell* is not a golden rule but a useful mantra to remember. When you are writing, think carefully to see if what you are writing could be shown instead of told. If you've told something, go back and see if you can't show it instead. Don't over-use the *show*, but learn how to use it with *tell* to make your writing smoother and clearer.

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