Show, Rather Than Tell—and How to Tell if You're Telling

Want your writing to sell? Show more than tell!

Report # 115

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Fiction and Creative Nonfiction

What makes the difference between a captivating story and one that falls flat? An active, engrossing short story, novel, memoir, or biography uses writing that shows a story unfolding. Writing that shows, rather than tells, draws readers into the story and makes them experience it, as if it happens around them.

An exposition-heavy story, however, tells a story, rather than showing it. It unfolds as if someone reports the story. That style of writing holds readers at a distance. Readers never feel immersed, captivated, or engrossed in writing that tells more than it shows.

Let me back up and examine the term *exposition*. Exposition exposes information, often background information, settings, character description, and the motivation behind a character's behavior. Exposition, while vital to any story, can come out in many ways, but when it comes out primarily in narrative, it usually *tells* information, rather than *showing* it. Too much narrative bogs down the story, kills the pace, and often bores readers.

To understand lengthy exposition, think of the classics in literature, when writers got paid by the word. Those older books often featured page after page of scene description. Contemporary writing, however, gets to the point and uses brief descriptions before moving the story forward with action and dialogue. Today's readers want the story to move along much quicker than the readers of yesteryear.

Rather than exposition-heavy stories, contemporary readers prefer stories filled with action and dialogue, both of which *show* the story, rather than *telling* it. The story unravels much like a movie, and readers keep turning pages to see what will happen next.

Novelists and short-story writers, especially, must strive to *show* a story, rather than *tell* it.

How to tell when you're telling

Here are a few tips to locate places in your manuscript that need rewriting to change telling into showing.

1. **Watch out for uses of passive, or inactive, verbs.** Inactive, or passive, verbs tell, rather than show.

   The most obvious passive verbs to find and eliminate whenever possible include the following: is, was, were, are, am, be, seem, realize, think, thought, wonder.

   The following passage *tells*, rather than *shows*: Harry was nervous. He wondered if the police sketch looked so much like him that he could be recognized.

   Look at what happens when the same information is rewritten to *show*, rather than *tell*: Harry raked his clammy hands against his jeans. He gawked at the bulletin board. The police sketch gazed back at him, his image exactly. He tugged at his collar, gulped, and glanced around to see if anybody recognized him.

   Note how the passive verbs—*was*, *wondered*, and *be*—disappeared, and strong, active verbs—*raked*, *gawked*, *gazed*, *tugged*, *gulped*, and *glanced*—drive the sentences instead. Observe how the first version tells what Harry feels and thinks, while the revised version gives readers a visual image of what Harry feels and thinks, mostly through Harry's actions.

   Use your computer to its greatest advantage by applying my Find and Refine Method™ to locate inactive (passive) verbs, so you can address each one and decide how you can rewrite the sentence in a more active form that shows, rather than tells. See page four for more information on the Find and Refine Method™.

2. **Note the number of quotation marks on each page.** If you have few or no quotation marks on the page, the page has too little dialogue, which means it may tell, rather than show. Novels should be between fifty-five and seventy percent dialogue, so each page would do well to reflect that average as well.

   Warning: authors have the choice of how to handle thoughts, or internal dialogue. You can format thoughts with italics (underlines in a manuscript), put them in quotation marks, or write them as part of a sentence, as long as the manuscript handles thoughts consistently throughout.

   Thoughts in italics: Jim spotted Frieda across the room. He wondered, *Did she see me?*

   Thoughts underlined: Jim spotted Frieda across the room. He wondered, <u>Did she see me</u>*?*

Thoughts treated as internal dialogue: Jim spotted Frieda across the room. He wondered, "Did she see me?"

Thoughts designated with wording: Jim spotted Frieda across the room. He wondered if she saw him.

If you choose to put quotation marks around thoughts, they do not count toward true dialogue. Thoughts tell, rather than show, because in reality you cannot hear the thoughts of others, so the writer has told you the character's thoughts.

Here is some internal dialogue that *tells*, rather than *shows*: David thought Mary was lying to him. He wondered, "I know she lied to John; is she lying to me, too?"

Here the thoughts come out through action and dialogue, both of which *show*, rather than *tell*: David scratched his head. "Mary, I know you lied to John. How can I tell you're not lying to me, too?"

Nonfiction

Nonfiction allows for a little more telling than fiction. Nonfiction can cover memoirs, self-help, reference, how-to, and other educational information. In nonfiction, the author must tell facts; however, the author does not have to tell fact after fact until readers grow bored. Instead, nonfiction writers also should show more than tell. How can you do that? Read on.

In most nonfiction books the author must state a point, and those points do *tell*, rather than *show*. Follow each point with one or more anecdote or example, however, and you *show*, rather than *tell*. Anecdotes and examples have an added benefit; not only do they entertain readers, but they also illustrate the point and cement the information in readers' minds. Readers may not always remember the point, but they likely will remember the anecdote or example and therefore get the point.

The following information tells a point: Entertainers raise their brand recognition when they create memorable monikers for themselves.

The following shows the point with an example: A few memorable monikers include Joey Brown, the Entertainment Clown; Gene, the Dancing Machine; Judge Judy; Chubby Checker; and Doctor Phil.

The following furthers the point with an anecdote: I like to speak to writers and impart the many decades of knowledge I have acquired. I also want people to remember me, so I'll get booked often and contacted when someone needs an editor. Freelance book editors who thoroughly diagnose and cure manuscript weaknesses earn the status of book doctor, so whenever I speak, I wear a white lab coat embroidered with the words, "Bobbie Christmas, Book Doctor." Although people chuckle at the joke—I certainly don't have a medical degree—they do remember me, even if they cannot remember my company name, Zebra Communications. As a result people can always put my name and moniker, Bobbie Christmas Book Doctor, into any search engine to find me on the Internet.

Notice that the anecdotes and examples almost always exceed the word count of the sentence or paragraph that first make the point. In that way the manuscript shows more than it tells, and the percentage of active verbs increases.

Conclusion

The most compelling writing, whether fiction or nonfiction, shows more than tells. Statistics confirm that books that *show* outsell books that *tell* one hundred to one. This report reveals ways you can easily discern when your words show and when they tell. Below I reveal an added secret: how to use your computer to find weak verbs, so you can revise the sentences that use them.

Use the Find and Refine Method™ to Revise Your Manuscript

Here's how to use my Find and Refine Method™ to find instances of telling in your manuscript and repair them. Open the Edit menu in your software program and go to Find. Type in the word or phrase you want to examine. First, for example, you may type in the passive verb *was*. Press Enter on your keyboard or Find Next in the dialogue box, and the computer will stop on the next instance of the word. Read the complete sentence and decide how you would like to revise the sentence to avoid using the passive verb in question. When finished with one sentence, save your document, return to Find, and press Find Next button to go to the next usage of the same word. Go through the entire manuscript addressing the use of that particular weak verb before you start again with the next weak verb you want to revise. Can you delete every passive verb? Probably not, but the more you rewrite to avoid weak verbs, the stronger and more active your writing becomes, and the more the writing will show, rather than tell.

For more information and a much more detailed source of words you can find and refine to make your manuscripts stronger, buy *Write In Style: Using Your Word Processor and Other Techniques to Improve Your Writing*, available while supplies last at http://zebraeditor.com/book_write_in_style.shtml.