

Show - Don't Tell!

by D L Nelson

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THEORY

Arghhh! New and not-so-new writers often fall in the trap of depriving their readers the subconscious pleasure of discovering the story by telling too much. When we tell, we limit our readers.

Telling is the lazy way out, but when we show our readers, we engage their senses and mind pulling them into our words.

Writers also sometimes make the mistake of telling - then go on to show what they just told their readers.

She was angry. She threw the glass at him. His shirt was stained red from the wine.

"I paid \$85 for that bottle of wine," he said.

It is sure that people don't throw glasses of very expensive (or inexpensive) wine at someone if they aren't angry. This combination of telling and showing can make a reader feel patronized. Cut the words,

She threw the glass at him, staining his shirt red.

"I paid \$85 for that bottle of wine," he said.

A good way to test ourselves is to reread what we've written to see what facts we give and then rewrite to show those facts.

Showing involves details, description, dialogue, sounds, smells, sensations. Let your readers experience them.

EXAMPLES

Example 1

Told: The Richards were poor.

Shown: No matter how Bill Richards tries to stretch the family budget he can't. He looks at the piles of paper stacked on the kitchen table. Should he pay half the rent or half the heating bill? Or all the rent. and nothing to the oil company. No, last winter when he did that, they refused to deliver oil and his family huddled in blankets until their next payday. Just lucky the pipes hadn't frozen. Now the first snow is due. He can't risk that again.

The difference: For poor Bill Richards, how poor is poor? Some people might feel poor if they can't go on holiday. For others it means not eating. For a family in Nigeria, Bill's poverty represents great wealth. The second example never uses the word poor, but we have no doubt that the Richards family is exactly that.

That is because the details show that he needs/wants to stretch his budget, that he doesn't have enough to cover everything, and that he has had to make choices, we get an idea of the level his poverty. We know he doesn't own his own house but rents. We know that his money troubles have been going on for at least a year, because he had problems last winter. We also know that winter is coming again, although we haven't been told it directly. The first snow is the detail that lets us in on tyranny of the calendar. We also can imagine/feel how cold the family was without heat.

Example 2

Told: It was spring.

Shown: Violets peppered the hill side. The sun no longer set before dinner but stayed around a bit later. Children ran with their coats opened, calling to each other. Baseballs replaced hockey pucks. There was the smell of damp earth.

The difference: We each have our own idea of spring, tulips, come up, the snow melts. However in the told example all we have is the fact that it was spring. However the second example engages our senses: Violet is a color for our sight. There is the special smell of spring dirt. We hear the voices of children, but we are also aware that it is only warm enough to unzip their jackets, not warm enough to take them off.

Example 3

Told: She didn't believe him.

Shown: "You've got to be kidding." She shook her head. "You must think I am stupid to fall for that."

This is a good example of dialog showing us what the character is thinking. It also shows her as a person not willing to be fooled and willing to challenge the man by accusing him of thinking her stupid.

EXERCISES

List five ways to SHOW that a young girl of five is happy.

List five way to SHOW that an old woman is happy.

Hint: There are age appropriate characteristics that also can reveal something about the person. For example if your old woman jumps up and down, it would say more than if she clapped her hands.

An office is ruled by a woman with an iron hand. Her employees are unhappy. Show the tension in the office but don't say they are unhappy and don't say that the woman is a tough boss.

A man has a mistress. His wife suspects it. Show how she puts her suspicions together. Don't use lipstick on his shirt or a change of his routine to include more night work.

Hint: avoid clichés in showing.

W3 Wise Words in Writing may be shared with other writers as long as it is attributed to D-L Nelson.

Even before D L Nelson could read or write, she knew she wanted to be a writer. Her early writing attempts included starting a school newspaper in the fourth grade and being a cub reporter for the Lawrence Eagle-Tribune in Massachusetts at 16.

Her publication W3 Wise Words in Writing is offered free to all writers.
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