

Writers Workshop #1

Show, Don't Tell: Okay, But How Do You Do It?

If you've been writing fiction for a while, you've undoubtedly heard it before: show, don't tell. Maybe you're confused about the difference between showing and telling. Or maybe you recognize the difference, but you're having trouble showing in your own writing. Or you understand the difference just fine, thank you, and you argue that thousands of fiction writers tell instead of show, and they get published, so what's the problem?

The problem is that telling—explaining and describing a character's traits tends to be, well, boring. Moreover, it's not nearly as believable as showing, or revealing, who your character is through his or her actions, gestures, and dialogue.

Let's do a writing exercise that can help you improve your ability to reveal character without telling, explaining, or otherwise hitting your readers over the head with obviousness. First, though, let's look at one scene written in two ways. The first, with a lot of telling, is adapted from my novel, NOT LIKE YOU. In this scene, fifteen-year-old Kayla and her mother Marilyn are driving from Dallas to a new home in New Mexico. Marilyn has just informed Kayla that they're going to meet Kayla's grandmother, a woman Kayla has believed to be dead.

I was surprised—nearly shocked—but I tried to stay calm. “Does she know we're coming?” I asked evenly, trying to sound like it was no big deal.

I think Mom was concerned about my reaction, because her face was kind of tight. “She doesn't know we're coming. We're going to surprise her.” Her voice sounded tense.

Now I was worried that this old, sick woman would die of shock when she saw us. But I didn't want Mom to know how worried I was. She hated it when I worried. “Why haven't we seen her all these years?” I asked. I pretended to be interested in the window crank so I wouldn't look too anxious or too curious. Mom shuts down when I do that.

“It's a long, complicated story,” she said nervously.

Uh-oh. She really didn't want to talk about it. “Maybe it would help us pass the time,” I said sarcastically. She changed the subject, clearly wanting to avoid this conversation. “You want to

take a break and check if there's a busted fuse or something in that radio?"

Now I was feeling kind of irritated. "Just tell me about her, okay?"

Now compare that scene with this one, which—you guessed it—shows, instead of tells, exactly as it appears in NOT LIKE YOU:

"Is she glad we're coming?" I asked.

Mom looked at me sideways and readjusted her grip on the wheel. "She doesn't know. We're going to surprise her."

Terrific, I thought. We're going to burst in on a frail old woman in a nursing home. I hoped the shock of seeing us wouldn't kill her. "Why haven't we seen her all these years?" I asked, flicking the loose knob on the end of the window crank.

Her fingers wiggled against the wheel. "It's a long, complicated story," she said.

I swallowed. "Well, we only have about ten more hours of driving."

She pressed her back against the seat. "You want to take a break and check if there's a busted fuse or something in that radio?"

"Did that already. It's not busted. Like I already told you."

Notice how the second one creates and holds more tension? How we can use our own intelligence to interpret Kayla's and Marilyn's emotions ourselves, without being told? See how much more I accomplished in the second version with a lot fewer words?

Here are some tips for revealing character by showing:

If you've used an adverb, take it out and replace it with a gesture or action that indicates the same thing. For example, instead of telling you,

"It's a long, complicated story," she said nervously.

I showed you Marilyn's nervousness:

Her fingers wiggled against the wheel. "It's a long, complicated story," she said.

Marilyn's other actions also reveal character: she looks at her daughter sideways, presses her back against the seat, and changes the subject. From these actions we can guess that she's feeling anxious and perhaps also guilty or ashamed.

Look also at how Kayla starts the scene by hiding her surprise and worry behind a forced calm, then expresses some of her growing irritation with a sarcastic remark ("Well, we only have about ten more hours of driving."), and by the end of this short scene, she's quietly but angrily standing up to her mother, practically forcing her to tell her the truth about this grandmother she has apparently lied about for years.

Nowhere in the second example do I use the words "anxious," "worried," or "angry." There are no adverbs describing the two characters' actions. The simple, emotion-packed actions, dialogue, and gestures speak for themselves, revealing Kayla to be a cautious, smart girl who's tired of her mother's dishonesty and lack of communication—at the same time as she fears trying to communicate with her—and Marilyn to be a wily, self-centered, and probably fearful woman who may or may not be attempting to make some positive changes in their lives.

Now let's do the writing exercise. Pick one of the following scenarios (or make up your own) and write it first with a lot of telling and then a second time with only showing. Before you begin, make a list of your characters' feelings, and make sure to include those particular words in the first scene you write. (Feel free to switch the gender of any of these characters.) A girl arrives at a restaurant to break up with her boyfriend of one year, who has also been her best friend for 10 years. She doesn't want her soon-to-be-ex to know there's someone else she's interested in, but the boy she plans to start dating next is at a table across the room.

1. A girl arrives at a restaurant to break up with her boyfriend of one year, who has also been her best friend for 10 years. She doesn't want her soon-to-be-ex to know there's someone else she's interested in, but the boy she plans to start dating next is at a table across the room.

2. A boy has promised his feminist girlfriend, who thinks he's incompetent in the kitchen, to make her a birthday cake. His cake is a disaster, and just as he's leaving the house to buy her one and try to make it look as though he made it, his girlfriend shows up at his house.
3. A boy must get at least a C in English for his parents to allow him to continue playing on the sports team he loves. He gets a C minus, and now he has to tell his parents, who have asked to see his report card.
4. A girl has been looking forward to meeting her dad's new girlfriend, whom she has heard much about. Her own mother died so long ago that she's ready to accept a new mom in her life. But when her dad takes her to a fancy restaurant and she meets the new girlfriend, she is horrified to learn that the woman is only 23 years old, a fact her father neglected to tell her.

Remember, in your first scene write exactly how the characters are feeling, using phrases like, "she felt..." or "I felt..." Use adverbs to describe verbs—"I asked curiously" or "He spoke angrily." Explain and over-explain. Pretend that your readers won't understand anything unless you spell it out for them.

In your second scene, take out the feeling words, the "I felt" and "She felt" phrases, and all the adverbs. Use actions, gestures, and dialogue to show us who your characters are instead. For example, replace "I felt so angry!" with "I slammed my hand on the table." "I thought that was very funny" becomes "I laughed so hard the milk went up my nose."

When you've written both scenes, read them aloud—to yourself if you are working alone, to another person if possible. Get feedback. Have you revealed your characters through action, not description? Are their feelings apparent through gestures or the tone of their dialogue? Have you written one scene that is too wordy, too obvious, too...boring? And another that shows character and creates tension in subtle, intriguing ways?

Showing who your characters are, revealing them through carefully drawn scenes, is not easy! You may have to rewrite your showing scene a number of times to learn how to show, not tell.

Is telling ever appropriate? Yes, it is—but it's hard to do it in a way that's engaging for the reader. That's a subject for a whole different

writing workshop! In the meantime, keep working on how to show, not tell. I promise you it will make your stories more engaging, more believable, and more exciting for your readers to read.