

Show, Don't Tell: Making the Reader "See"

When writers Show, rather than Tell, they are using words to create images that help readers "see" what is being described, as if projecting images onto a reader's mental movie screen. The senses, such as vision, are how we humans experience the world around us, so Showing often makes a stronger connection with readers, especially in personal essays or in creative writing. Here are three key things to keep in mind:

1. Be Specific. In a macro sense, being specific has to do with not generalizing. For example, if you want to show the reader your residence hall, you have to evoke details that make it *your* residence hall. You can't rely on what the reader knows generally about residence halls. In a micro sense, being specific has to do with exact language and precision. Mark Twain said that the difference between any word and the right word "'tis the difference between the lightning-bug and the lightning." Gustav Flaubert coined a term: "le mot juste" – the exact word. The exact word means that you convey precisely what you want the reader to see and you do it in a way that is fresh, clean, concise, and accurate. Think about it: Do you mean *red* or *scarlet* or *maroon*? Did the wind *blow* or did it *slap*? Choose precise nouns and active verbs. You may push your exactness further and particularize those nouns and verbs with strong modifiers (adjectives, adverbs, phrases, clauses), but don't overdo it. One adjective often is better than two if it is specific.

2. Illustrate. Turn the abstract into the concrete. Use anecdotes (short stories), examples, or description. Abstract applies to words such as "good," "bad," "love," "beauty," or "anger." Such words aren't tangible. We can't see them, touch them, taste them. But as a writer, you want to illustrate exactly what kind of "good" or "beautiful" you mean, and you do this through concrete details: an action, a physical detail – something that the reader can "see."

3. Tap the senses. Use fresh language that evokes sight, sounds, smells, taste, and touch to connect with readers. Description doesn't have to be flowery; it can be concise and simple (in fact, this is usually better).

Example

The woman was sick. She didn't look lively at all. She showed symptoms of illness. She clearly was not herself.

This is generalized language; here, the writer is *telling* us what a sick woman is. "Sick," "lively," and "not herself" are abstracts. But readers want to know *this woman's* particular version of "sick," so you as the writer must strive to convey it.

Revised example

The woman curled up on the bed, unmoving. A sticky film covered her half-closed eyes. Her once shiny brown hair appeared tangled and matted. She breathed with a harsh, rattling sound.

This is *showing* a sick person. These details convey a specific kind of sickness, not a general, abstract one. Now we can *see* (and hear) this woman. These concrete, particular details elevate the writing from generic to bold.

Practice: Try turning these telling sentences into showing ones. Think: How can you make the reader "see"?

The kitchen was a mess. It looked like no one had cleaned it for a while.

The house was old. It didn't look like anyone cared for it.

My mother is a caring person. She has a great passion for life.

Works consulted: Goodman, Richard. "In Search of the Exact Word." *The Writer's Chronicle* 37.1 (Sept. 2004): 54-59.