

Scott Editorial

Show vs Tell Exercise Sheet

A practical workbook for choosing when to dramatise, when to summarise, and how to move between the two with control.



This workbook is designed to be practical. Move through it slowly, write into it honestly, and return to the exercises more than once. The strongest manuscripts are not built by inspiration alone, but by careful decisions made page by page.

Start Here

Show versus tell is often taught too simply. Strong writing uses both. Telling can move time, deliver context, compress routine, and create a clean narrative bridge. Showing is most useful when the emotional weight, sensory life, tension, or choice of a moment matters. The goal is not to eliminate telling, but to become deliberate.

A better question than 'am I telling?'

Ask instead: what deserves to be experienced in real time, and what only needs to be understood?

How to Recognise Telling

Telling usually names the meaning of a moment rather than letting the reader assemble it.

- Emotion labels without physical or behavioural evidence: angry, nervous, heartbroken, jealous.
- Relationship labels without scene evidence: they were close, he was controlling, she felt unsafe.
- Judgement words that replace dramatisation: beautiful, terrible, strange, awkward, wonderful.
- Summary where a pivotal moment should be dramatized.
- Explanation that arrives before the reader has had a chance to notice and infer.

How to Show More Effectively

1. Use behaviour. What does the character do with their hands, eyes, breath, pace, silence, or posture?
2. Use selective sensory detail. Choose details that reflect the character's state rather than listing every possible sensation.
3. Use dialogue and subtext. What is avoided, deflected, repeated, or disguised?
4. Use concrete specifics. Replace broad adjectives with particular images, objects, and actions.
5. Use cause and effect. Let one action provoke another so the reader experiences emotional logic.

Worked Examples: Emotion

Telling	Showing	Why the second version works
Leah was nervous about the interview.	Leah checked the name on the glass door twice, then wiped her palm on the lining of her coat before she reached for the handle.	The nerves are visible through action. The scene remains active.
He was furious with his brother.	When his brother touched the photograph, Eli took it back so quickly the frame clicked against his ring.	The anger emerges through possessive, sharp movement.

Telling	Showing	Why the second version works
Priya felt lonely in the new city.	By the third evening, Priya had started keeping the radio on for the voice of it, even when she was not listening.	Loneliness becomes concrete and memorable.

Worked Examples: Setting

Telling	Showing	Note
The office was oppressive.	The windows did not open, and the air held the stale sweetness of burned coffee and printer heat.	Setting becomes sensory and specific.
The house was neglected.	Paint had lifted from the skirting boards in curled strips, and someone had wedged a cereal box under the back door to keep out the draught.	Selected details imply wider neglect.
The street was unsafe.	Half the lamps were dark, and every shop shutter wore a fresh dent at shoulder height.	The danger is suggested rather than announced.

When Telling Is the Better Choice

Do not burden every sentence with full dramatisation.

- To compress weeks, months, or repeated routine.
- To transition cleanly between scenes.
- To clarify information the reader genuinely needs, once the dramatic moment has already landed.
- To control pace after an intense passage.
- To create a deliberate narrative distance in some styles of storytelling.

Useful distinction

Showing is about experience. Telling is about management. Good manuscripts know how to do both.

Exercises

Complete the following by rewriting the telling sentence into a more dramatic version. Then compare your version against the prompts below.

Exercise 1

Marta was embarrassed when she realised she had the wrong file.

Rewrite

Which detail did you choose, and why?

Exercise 2

The twins did not trust the new neighbour.

Rewrite

Which detail did you choose, and why?

Exercise 3

Jacob was exhausted after the funeral.

Rewrite

Which detail did you choose, and why?

Exercise 4

The café had become the centre of the town's gossip.

Rewrite

Which detail did you choose, and why?

Exercise 5

Nina adored her grandmother.

Rewrite

Which detail did you choose, and why?

Exercise 6

The team felt defeated after the meeting.

Rewrite

Which detail did you choose, and why?

Fixing Overwritten Showing

Some writers over-correct and begin explaining every beat in microscopic detail. Watch for:

- Too many gestures in a short space.
- Every emotion translated into trembling, swallowing, sighing, or clenched fists.
- Sensory detail that does not belong to the point-of-view character.
- Images that are vivid but unrelated to the emotional focus of the scene.
- Action that slows the scene more than it sharpens it.

Overdone version	Tighter version
Amelia's fingers trembled as she reached shakily for the cup, her stomach twisting into anxious knots while the room seemed louder, brighter, sharper than before.	Amelia reached for the cup and missed the handle the first time.
He was angry, truly angry, in that hot and violent way that made the blood pound in his temples and his whole body feel like a struck match.	By the time he answered, the vein in his neck had started to jump.

Scene Audit

Use this on your own pages.

Sentence or passage	Mostly tells / mostly shows	Does it need changing?	Revision note

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Final Questions

Where in my manuscript am I naming emotion instead of dramatising it?

Where am I over-showing and slowing the scene unnecessarily?

Which scenes deserve full experiential treatment?

Where would a short, clean summary strengthen pace?
