

**Show Don't Tell: Learning to Love and Trust Your Readers**

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Presented to 17<sup>th</sup> Annual Florida Writers Conference  
 Florida Writers Association  
 Orlando, Florida  
 October 19, 2018

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**Genesis of this workshop**

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**An observation from Syd Field**

"Action is character; a person is what he *does*, not what he *says*. Film is behavior. Because we're telling a story in pictures, we must show how the character acts and reacts to the incidents and events that he/she confronts and overcomes (or doesn't overcome) during the storyline." (Syd Field, *Screenplay*, p. 47)

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### The beauty (and limits) of "showing"

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| <p><b>Showing (scene)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Paint a picture</li> <li>• Brings the reader into the story             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Connects reader to characters and setting</li> <li>• Makes the scene "real"</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Detailed storytelling is the technique</li> <li>• Works well when told in "real time"</li> <li>• Similar to a movie "close up" where you can see reactions</li> </ul> <p><small>www.samuelrstaley.com, blog.srstaley.com<br/>www.srstaley.com, blog.srstaley.com<br/>http://aroundthewriterstable.com/</small></p> | <p><b>Limits of "showing"</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Showing is hard (hence this workshop)</li> <li>• Too much "showing" can exhaust the reader</li> <li>• Can be overdone: "purple prose"</li> <li>• Cannot be used on it's own</li> <li>• Finding the right blend of showing and telling is an art</li> </ul> <p><small>Florida Writers Association, October 20, 2017</small></p> |
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### The Power of Showing: *Adrift* (2018)



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### Telling vs Showing: Tortuga Bay

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| <p><b>Early draft</b></p> <p>"Damn this storm!" Captain Munoz muttered as he held on the railing. The waves were tossing his ship around in the sea as if it were a child's toy. He looked at the helmsman. "Keep her bow downwind!"</p> <p>The helmsman looked as if he would throw a sword through Munoz's heart.</p> <p>The storm raged on as its crew fought to stay on course.</p> <p><small>www.samuelrstaley.com, blog.srstaley.com</small></p> | <p><b>Published scene (p. 85)</b></p> <p>"Damn this storm!"</p> <p>Captain Munoz clutched the railing as the crest of a wave spun the frigate's bow across the wind again. The stern fell from under his feet as the ship plunged off a receding wave. "Keep her bow downwind."</p> <p>The helmsman looked as if he would throw a sword through Munoz's heart: if he weren't more afraid of being swept off the deck by the next wave. The wooden beam that kept the ship on course snapped to the side, pulling the helmsman off his feet as two more sailors threw their bodies against the tiller to steady the ship. They had barely turned the rudder back to its rightful place when the back of the ship heaved up under their feet to ride another twenty-foot roller.</p> <p><small>Florida Writers Association, October 19, 2018</small></p> |
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### Exercise 1

**Set up:** Sue and John have gone to a college bar for drinks. Realizing that John will probably drink too much, Sue drinks moderately. Sure enough, John has had a bit much. As he goes to the bar to get another beer, Sue is approached by another drunk college man. She resists, but the man persists. John returns with his beer and is incensed at the other man.

**POV:** Sue

**Prompt:** *Sue looked at John, his fingers clenched around the necks of the beer bottles. "Leave her alone," he yelled. The drunk stepped back, Sue could see his muscles tense. "She's mine!"*

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### Exercise 2

**Set up:** Father Paul has been serving his inner-city neighborhood for 20 years. He has struggled to maintain 24 hour access to the chapel despite fears of burglary and robbery from the diocese. He has just learned that his going to be transferred to a suburban parish 1,500 miles away.

**POV:** Father Paul

• **Prompt:** *Father Paul made the sign of the cross, and stood before the Alter. Even before he turned, the shuffle of several pairs of shoes began to rise and fill the church. He turned, and immediately recognized Jose and four other members of his street gang.*

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### "The Inner Eye"

Gina Hogan Edwards  
<http://aroundthewriterstable.com/>

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| <p><b>Telling (narrative summary)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Telling has a place</li> <li>• Summarizing, explaining             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dialogue is almost always "showing"</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Add perspective, dimension, or context             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Zoom out, or panning a camera in a movie</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Gives reader "breathing room," a break from intensity of scenes</li> </ul> | <p><b>Best uses of "telling"</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Show passage of time</li> <li>• Crucial background information</li> <li>• Transitions between scenes and chapters</li> <li>• Interject a character's thoughts or interpretations</li> <li>• Common in science fiction, fantasy, mystery, westerns, historical fiction, YA</li> </ul> |
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### A Few Questions to Guide the Creative Process

(Source: Gina Hogan Edwards)

- What do you know about the characters?
- What do you know about the setting?
- What do you know about the situation or circumstances?
- What do you know about the relationships between the characters or between the characters and the setting?
- Is this scene meaningful to the story?
- Does the story move forward? Is it just action or is it relevant action?
- What does the author want the reader to believe is important in the scene?

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### Closing Thoughts...

- Storytelling is the core of both film and fiction writing
- Readers like to be immersed in their stories
  - "Showing" invites readers into the story
- The key is the right blend of showing and telling
- Don't lose your own voice in an attempt to conform to someone else's literary tastes
  - *Ender's Game*, the *Divergent* series, Clive Cussler, Gregg Hurwitz are successful with little showing



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