

SHOW AND TELL

One of the common weaknesses of application essays is that they "tell" too much and "show" too little about their author. What is the difference between "telling" and "showing?" In "telling" the author uses mostly assertions and self-appraisals instead of narrative description in describing his experiences. If your essay is filled with adjectives and vague phrases that lack specific details, you are probably "telling," not "showing." Also, if your descriptions are statements of opinion, not facts, you are also probably "telling."

Some examples of "telling:"

"My experience as a head of the student organization increased my teamwork abilities and efficiency in problem-solving, which will be of great help in my future pursuits."

"In my experience working with senior managers, I was able to quickly build up my skills and confidence in my business abilities. I was able to endure and, in fact, began to enjoy to challenge. Overall, I considered my performance to be quite good."

"My research experience in the Department of Microbiology was my most interesting and knowledge-enhancing academic experience during college."

There is nothing grammatically wrong with the above examples, but none of them reveal much about their authors. What does the author of the first example mean by "increasing [his] teamwork abilities and his efficiency in problem solving?" Maybe he simply means that this was the first time he worked in a team. Or perhaps, he was responsible for something more significant, such as recruiting, organizing and supervising a group with one-hundred members. What kind of business skills did the author of the second example learn? Learning how to use a spreadsheet or learning complex financial and accounting techniques? Also, Why was the author content with his performance? Because he showed up for work everyday or because he researched and wrote a fifty-page report? What does the author of the third example mean by interesting? This adjective can refer to almost anything.

You can avoid this type of vagueness in your essay by learning to "show" instead of "tell." In "showing," an author supports his assertions with specific evidence and proof. Because of the inclusion of concrete examples, "showing" is much more convincing and interesting than just "telling." Here are some contrasting examples.

Tell:

"I had a large amount of responsibility in working at the ABC Community Center."

Show:

"While working at the ABC Community center I was responsible for the daily supervision of fifteen teenage counselors aged sixteen to twenty and sixty children aged five to twelve. The summer camp ran from 7:30 am until 6:00 from Monday through Friday and included daily swimming lessons and art activities, and weekly field trips."

Tell:

"During my college years, I found that I had a special interest in economics therefore have decided to pursue a graduate degree in economics."

Show:

"Two specific academic experiences influenced me to pursue studies in agricultural economics. In March 1994 a report written by myself along with ten classmates entitled "The Effect of a Free Trade Economy on the Marketing of Poultry," was published in the Journal of Agricultural Economics. This was my first experience integrating theory and practical experience and taught me a significant amount about global markets. The second experience was..."

Tell:

"From reading various research papers and journals, along with joining seminars and training programs, I have found that the counseling service currently has many problems. After receiving my degree, I hope to help solve them."

Show:

"From my experiences in counseling, I am aware that there are three basic problems confronting Taiwan's counseling field. First, social change has outpaced the capacities of existing social programs. For example, schools and social programs are unable to handle the growing problem of juvenile delinquency. Second, there are a lack of appropriate social training programs to train current and new social workers to deal with all the problems they may encounter. Third, Chinese culture is centered around the family unit while Western culture emphasizes the individual. This leads to value conflicts between Western-trained counselors and Chinese patients."

The more specifically and concretely you describe your experiences and opinions, the more convincing they will be and, consequently, the more you will reveal about yourself. So when writing your essay, keep reminding yourself **SHOW, DON'T TELL.**