

# Show Not Tell: What the Heck is That Anyway?

by Shirley Jump

"Don't tell us that the old lady screamed.  
Bring her on and let her scream." -- Samuel Clemens

We've all heard the phrase "Show, don't tell" but may not know what it means or how to do it. It's one of those elusive things that seem impossible to capture, even harder to get down on paper. However, there are a few tricks of the trade that can help.

First, you need to know the difference between TELLING and SHOWING. **Telling is abstract, passive and less involving of the reader. It slows down your pacing, takes away your action and pulls your reader out of your story.**

**Showing, however, is active and concrete; creating mental images that brings your story -- and your characters -- to life.** When you hear about writing that is vivid, evocative and strong, chances are there's plenty of showing in it. Showing is interactive and encourages the reader to participate in the reading experience by drawing her own conclusions.

## **There are several signs to look for that will tell you that you are TELLING:**

1. **Those nasty adverbs:** Basically, anything ending in -ly is an adverb. For example:

**BEFORE:** "You are such a jerk," he said angrily.

First off, you should never modify "said" with an adverb. Second, keep adverb use to a minimum. They're not evil little words that have to be avoided at all costs, but they should be kept to a minimum. It's far better to SHOW he was angry:

**AFTER:** "You are such a jerk." Dan slammed the phone book shut and threw it at the couch. The pages ruffled open, the names inside seeming exposed and vulnerable against the stark black leather. Dan got to his feet, moving so fast his chair skidded against the floor and dented the new drywall.

Do you see the details in the second example? Nowhere did I use the word "angrily" or even "angry." I didn't have to say he was mad. It's pretty clear. In fact, I didn't even have to say he said the words. By showing with his actions right after his dialogue, you know it's him talking.

2. **Not "To Be": Avoid the forms of this verb** -- am, is, are, was, was being, will have been, could have been, et al. These not only put you in the passive tense much of the time, but they also tend to remove your reader from the action. Again, they aren't evil words to be avoided at all costs (see I just used the verb myself) but if you can work your writing to make it stronger without the word "was" or any form of it, you'll show more than you told.

**BEFORE:** The room was perfect. She saw it and was immediately transported back to her childhood because it had all the elements she remembered.

**AFTER:** She threw open the wide oak door and stepped into a past from twenty years ago. The bedroom she remembered, down to the last detail. Pink candy-striped walls with white trim. A thick white shag carpet, two plush maroon velvet chairs flanking a silent fireplace. An enormous canopy bed, draped with a sheer white veil. Linda pressed a hand to her mouth. What were the chances? Another room, just like the one she'd had, years ago, before she'd grown up and grown out of the one space that had brought her happiness.

I don't have the word "was" in there at all. Granted, I took a little poetic license with the rules of grammar, but you can do that. You're the writer. You can "see" the room now, though. You can feel it, too, I hope. You can see the details that bring her back to the past, rather than just being told that it does. This gives the reader something concrete to visualize and connect with.

**Writing Exercise:** Take this phrase: "It was hot." Rewrite it without the word was. Better yet, don't even use the word hot. Think of all the things you can use to describe heat. Make a list, if you want. Write a few sentences that SHOW the weather is hot.

3. **Starting with As or -Ing:** Again, as with all of the other examples, this is not a do or die rule either. However, in general, you should avoid starting a sentence with an "As" or "-ing" construction. "As she walked" or "Rapping at the door" are okay beginnings, but just okay. They're again, telling, not showing.

**BEFORE:** Rapping at the door, Elaine made her presence known to the people inside the house.

**AFTER:** Elaine formed a tight fist with her right hand and pounded on the unforgiving oak. They'd hear her, or she'd break her hand letting them know she'd come to call.

Do you see the tighter imagery in the second example? The stronger beginning? Removing that -ing construction really helps. The same principle applies with "As" constructions.

4. **Don't just Look and Feel:** Looked and felt are great words, but they certainly aren't powerful and they certainly don't show much. Go back to example 1. You could interchange "he looked angry" or "he felt angry" in the "he said angrily" part. Rewriting it without those words is much stronger. **Telling the reader someone looks a certain way or feels a certain way is cheating the reader out of drawing her own conclusions. SHOW the reader and let her interpret.**

**Helpful Hint:** Study movies. In movies, they can't TELL you anything. Everything is visual, thus, shown. How do you know someone is upset, angry, happy, sad, frustrated, etc.? Watch movies and write down facial expressions, movements, actions, gestures, etc. Use these to describe your own characters when you're writing. This is the best way to learn how to SHOW emotion instead of telling it.

**Writing Exercise:** Here's an exercise for you to do with that -- take a word: scary, weird, ugly, etc. And then tell what it looks like. What does scary look like? Weird? Ugly? Don't say the baby was ugly (and you know, we've all seen one ugly baby in our lifetimes), describe it. Don't say the man acted weird -- tell us how he acted. SHOW us him in action.

### TIPS FOR SHOWING NOT TELLING

**Here's a list of quick tips to keep in mind that should help you show, not tell:**

1. **Use specific details.** The best are ones that are really specific. Is the car a Toyota or a Volkswagen? Is it cherry-red or apple-red? Does the man sit in a La-Z-Boy or a Barcalounger? Brand names help the reader identify with things better, too. Also, the more concrete your details are, the more your reader can get a visual picture. One way to do this is to take a simple sentence and increase it with details by adding to it (example from <http://www.uoflife.com/wc/creative/concrete.htm>):

- My lawn was covered with leaves.
- Leaves blew through my yard and piled up against the shrubs and fence.
- A cold autumn breeze blew leaves through my yard. I stared out the window and watched them pile up against the sparse shrubs and worn out fence.

- A cold autumn breeze blew leaves through my yard. Summer had ended and I would be the last one to leave the cabin. I sat alone, holding a mug of hot chocolate without drinking, and stared out the back window, watching the red, gold, and brown leaves pile up violently against the sparse shrubs and worn out fence. I had long since given up caring about anything.

2. **Use sensory images:** Add in all five senses. If you're describing a beach, don't just talk about the heat or the color of the sand; add in the smell of Coppertone, the feel of the sand beneath your toes, the sound of the seagulls, etc. The more you can create a world for your reader by adding sensory details, the more she'll be drawn into your writing.

3. **Use good comparisons for your metaphors - not clichés.** Metaphors can be a great way to show (Ex: No wonder the dog barked all the time. She had all the courage of a ninety-pound knight about to undertake his first jousting match. From *The Lady Had Nine Lives* by Shirley Jump, TBA 2004). But you want to be unique. You don't want to compare your things to the same tired old things that everyone else has used. When in doubt, use Shirley's Rule of Six.

4. **Vary Your Sentence Structure.** Go back to the example with the bedroom and see how a varied sentence structure can keep the reader on her toes, paying attention to the writing. It's also a great tool to use when you want to show suspense or fear (use shorter sentences) or draw out suspense (use longer sentences). Or emphasize a point with a sentence set out by itself.

**Example:** Her face was still soft, tinged with sadness, her gaze on some faraway spot. He wondered where her thoughts had gone and what could possibly be so bad in Claire's life that she'd stand in the shower of a motor home and cry. The Claire he knew was stoic, optimistic. Never had he seen her upset or hurt, even when she'd fallen from the top of the monkey bars in third grade and skinned up her knees.

As a child, she'd been the Margaret to his Dennis. But as adults -- The very things that had driven him crazy were beginning to spark his interest. No, not just spark. Inflammation.

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5. **Use specific actions to make your point.** Don't say things like "he had a reputation for driving like a maniac" -- show him driving like a maniac. Let us see him doing those things. Or, you can have other characters talk about him, too. Dialogue can be a great showing tool.

6. **Use dialogue as a showing tool** (duh! You knew that one was coming). Dialogue is wonderful for bringing out information. Don't do the recap kind of dialogue "oh, don't you remember, she's your real mother because your sister had an affair with your father and then we all passed you off like a sibling" kind of thing. That's information the other character would already know. However, you can do something like:

"I hate Julia."

"She did the best she could," Kenny said. "What choice did you expect her to make at fifteen?"

"A different one than pretending I was her sister, for God's sake. All this time, I've grown up thinking I'm somebody else's daughter." Anne slammed the refrigerator door shut. Inside, the mayonnaise shuddered against the salad dressing. "If she was old enough to have a kid, she was old enough to admit the truth."

Kenny shoved his sandwich away, as if the bologna no longer interested him. "This family is really good at secrets. If there was a Guinness record for the most lies ever told, we'd have it." He sighed, then met her gaze. "Your father really is your father."

7. **Don't pad it too much.** Don't overwhelm the reader with description either. You're not writing a travelogue, you're writing a story. Add enough details to give them a picture, then move on to the meat of your story. If you have several paragraphs in a row of description, chances are you've gone

overboard. Try to work the description in with the dialogue and action instead so you can maintain your pacing and reader interest.

8. **Don't be afraid of telling sometimes, too.** A mix of both showing and telling is a good idea. You don't have to show every single thing in your book. Sometimes, a quick telling helps get through a slow part or provides a quick recap. The goal is to make the MAJORITY of your writing vivid and strong (i.e., showing) and keep the telling to a minimum.

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Shirley Jump spends her days writing romantic comedies with sweet attitude for Kensington Books (*The Bride Wore Chocolate*, September 2004) and for Silhouette Romance (*Her Frog Prince*, December 2004) to feed her shoe addiction and avoid housework. A wife and mother of two, her real life provides enough humor to fill more books than she can write, one which won the Bookseller's Best Award. In her spare time, she writes articles and is the author of *How to Publish Your Articles* (Square One Writer's Guide Series; also available from Writer's Digest Book Club and Forbes Book Club). Visit her website at [www.shirleyjump.com](http://www.shirleyjump.com).