



Creative Writing 101: Show vs. Tell

by

R. Michael Burns

Anyone who has ever taken a creative writing course or picked up a book on the subject has surely encountered the famous refrain: show, don't tell! I certainly got that comment frequently enough during my days as a CW major at the University of Colorado. What I wasn't so frequently told, though, was what exactly that dire entreaty meant.

If you're as puzzled by this as I was, perhaps this article will help clear things up a bit. Since this website is devoted to fiction, I'll focus on narrative prose. Some of what follows, though, will also apply to other forms, such as poetry, creative non-fiction, and even journalistic writing.

Let me begin by saying what I believe fiction is supposed to accomplish. In this context, I'm not talking about high-minded ideals like dissecting the human condition or creating timeless portraits of complex and interesting characters — in other words, I'm not talking about going out and committing "literature," whatever that might be. All of that is grand, and I've written about it in previous articles, but here I'm interested in something slightly more nuts-and-bolts-ish.

In my (never-too) humble opinion, fiction is all about forging an emotional link between the author and the reader. While many a great piece of fiction functions on a high intellectual level, the good stuff almost always works, first and foremost, viscerally. We are drawn into it because something there speaks to our deeper selves, gets inside us and takes hold. Indeed, fiction always has to sneak past the barriers our intellects erect, because (by virtue of the label "fiction") we know that the stories we're being told are fabrications. We call this feat of mental gymnastics "willing suspension of disbelief," and good writers tend to help us accomplish it in two ways: by making their fiction as plausible as possible, and even more significantly, by blazing through the brain and going for the gut.

One of the best ways to do this is by creating vivid images that immerse readers in the world of the fiction — by not merely telling readers what's happening, but showing it to them.

Let the Reader See It...

Basically, the distinction is this: telling merely catalogs actions and emotions, showing creates images in a reader's imagination. It's the difference between the laundry list and the laundry.

Here's a very basic tell sentence:

Bob felt scared.

It's unambiguous, but not at all evocative — Bob may feel fear, but the reader isn't likely to. Consider this alternative:

Bob's face went ashen. His breathing came in ragged gasps.

True, the second example is a good deal longer than the first — ten words as compared to a bare three — but you get a lot more bang for your narrative buck. Like the first, the second example makes it pretty clear that Bob is scared, but unlike the first, it creates a distinct picture in the reader's mind. As an added bonus, it also gives us a bit of insight into how frightened Bob is, and how he handles his fear. It seems to me that this sort of insight is central to creating intricate, compelling characters — which many would say is the cornerstone of good fiction.

Emotions in particular are fertile ground for getting showy where it's easy to lapse into mere telling. Compare the following two lines:

“Let's go,” Mary said impatiently.

“Let's go!” Mary snapped.

The first line merely tells us of Mary's impatience. By changing the punctuation and choosing a stronger verb, the second version shows her impatience. This also helps you follow another common CW 101 caveat: don't overuse adverbs. The stronger verb here eliminates the need for the “telling” adverb.

Be warned on this count, though: some editors out there vehemently dislike tag lines that use any verb which does not literally refer to speaking (i.e. “...he said” or “...she whispered” or “...they shouted”). They will not take kindly to expressions like “...the sergeant barked” or “...Lydia hissed...” Personally, I think this is nonsense — metaphor is the stock-in-trade of creative writing, and the more evocative a phrase, the better. But these editors are correct in wanting writers to eschew the trite, the hackneyed, and the absurd. As always, the best advice is: be aware of what editors like and what they don't, and submit accordingly.

Use Strong Verbs...

The above examples also point to another great truism of modern creative writing: verbs should carry the weight of the description. One of the great things about the English language is that it has always borrowed, collected, stolen, and otherwise appropriated vocabulary from other languages. As a result, our lexicon is vast and immensely varied. This means that you typically have a fair number of verbs from which to choose to describe any given action. If you're keen to make a sentence come to life, break out your thesaurus and dig around for the most vivid verbs you can find.

Consider the sentence:

Daniel walked down the street.

It gives us the basics, but it's bland. By contrast, the sentence:

Daniel ambled down the street.

shows us a much clearer picture of Daniel and gives us a sense of his mood. He's casual, in no hurry, maybe even a bit disinterested. All of that is contained in the more specific verb "ambled." Compare that to the image created by the sentences:

Daniel strutted down the street.

Daniel slunk down the street.

Daniel shuffled down the street.

and you see how much impact a good verb has. Each version creates a significantly different image of our friend Daniel.

Indeed, the reason writers are so frequently (pardon my adverb) warned against adverbs is that many writers dress up sentences with adverbs when stronger verbs are in order. Rather than say:

Ethel wrote her name messily on the line.

try,

Ethel scribbled her name on the line.

The verb "scribbled" contains the implication of "messily" and saves you from needing an awkward adverb to create a vivid image.

Let Readers Feel For Themselves...

Beware, too, of sentences that seem to tell the reader how to feel, particularly when writing in the third person. Take a look at a couple of short passages from two highly-successful novels by popular writers. Both involve startling turns of events, but the passages handle the surprise factor very differently. In the first, from *The Sword of Shannara* by Terry Brooks, the Druid Allanon is doing battle with an evil entity called a Skull Bearer. Writes Brooks,

Then, in a totally unexpected move, the black wings spread wide and it circled into the air...

The obvious problem here is that, by telling readers the move was "totally unexpected," Brooks causes us to expect it. He seems almost to be instructing us to be surprised, but his language in this case lacks the immediacy needed to genuinely shock us.

Now take a gander at how Thomas Harris handles the same emotion in a line from his novel, *The Silence of the Lambs*. Here, FBI Agent Clarice Starling has just discovered a corpse in a bathtub in the basement of a serial killer's home. Highly attuned to details, Clarice notices that the corpse's watch is still running:

The tiny insect-crawl of the second hand was the last thing she saw before the lights went out.

I remember reading that line for the first time and actually jumping — and I'd seen the film and knew what

was coming. The line is a shocker because Harris doesn't tell us to feel surprised, he simply focuses our attention on a bit of creepy minutia then turns off the lights. Where Brooks's language warns us of something unexpected, Harris's delivers it. Where Brooks tells, Harris shows.

God's in the Details...

Showing is also about relieving ambiguity. If a sentence says:

The man was well-dressed.

the reader may not have a good sense of what that means — the author's notion of "well-dressed" may be rather different from the reader's. If instead the line reads:

The man wore an ash-gray Armani coat over a linen shirt, a red silk cravat Windsor-knotted at his throat.

the reader can all but see the guy — or at least his clothes — and has an idea what the narrator considers well-dressed. It may seem a bit like a laundry list (which is exactly what it is) but this handful of details creates a clear image of the character and allows readers to decide for themselves that the man is well-dressed. And, again, this more specific description gives readers a stronger sense of the character — he either has money or wants people to think he does, and that "Windsor-knotted cravat" suggests an almost aristocratic air about him.

Similarly, a sentence that says:

The house looked old.

leaves readers wondering what "old" looks like as far as the narrator is concerned.

The house slouched in a yard choked with weeds, its paint faded and flaking, the lace curtains in its windows yellowed with age.

makes it clear.

Let the Dialogue Speak for Itself...

The content of dialogue, too, is a useful "showing" tool. It can give readers insight into a character's intelligence and level of sophistication, can hint at his background and even suggest something about his self-image.

To take the last instance first, why simply tell readers that Dr. Wells is an egotist when you can show us?

"Once again," Dr. Wells said, sighing, "I had to step in and save that quack Ingles. I knew I should have objected more strenuously when the board appointed him, but I let them silence me, despite my better judgment."

Referring to a colleague as a quack and implying that his opinions are superior to the board's makes it immediately obvious that he has a high opinion of himself. But his frequent use of first-person singular pronouns

(I, me) can also carry this message, and more subtly, throughout the passage, even when he isn't denouncing the people he works with.

The same is true for intellectual qualities. If you want a character to seem intelligent, let her say intelligent things. If a man's not well educated, keep his vocabulary comparatively simple (though not necessarily the content of his speech — he might be highly intelligent but simply lack linguistic sophistication...). Don't tell your reader that a character is inarticulate, show that character struggling to find the right words to express himself. You can do so even through simple interactions. For example, rather than tell a reader:

The two men exchanged greetings.

why not show us:

“Well howdy there, Jimmy,” Brian said, grinning.

“Ain't seen you in a coon's age!”

“Hey,” Jimmy answered, giving Brian a small nod.

The little dose of dialect in Brian's line hints that he might come from Texas or Oklahoma. Jimmy's curt answer and understated nod suggests that he might feel less enthusiastic about this meeting than Brian does. While dialect and regional clichés should, of course, be used sparingly, they often prove quite useful in showing readers qualities in a story's characters, minor and major. Used well, they can also help delineate characters in a reader's mind, making the whole narrative more vivid.

On the Other Hand...

There are, however, a few good arguments for telling, at least once in a while. The best is simple brevity. Showing almost always takes a good deal more words than does telling, and if an event is comparatively unimportant, you may want to mention it only in passing. (Of course if it's really unimportant, you should probably consider simply leaving it out.) Likewise, if a character is recounting events with which the reader is already well-familiar, you may want to gloss over it with a tell line:

Jane explained what had happened.

You might decide that allowing the reader to hear some or all of the familiar events in Jane's voice is worth repeating what the reader already knows, in which case — go for it. If not, this quick line gets the job done and allows you to move on to more immediate, active scenes.

Another, more treacherous argument for telling rather than showing is that telling is less emotionally charged — and therefore less emotionally manipulative. Certainly a litany of events — stripped of strong verbs and adjectives and the emotional baggage they inevitably carry with them — leaves more room for the reader to render his or her own emotional response.

To my way of thinking, though, fiction is about characters, and characters are bundles of emotions. It's only natural that any story filtered through a character's perspective, whether in the first person voice or in the so-

called “fused” third person (in which an omniscient narrator shares a character’s thoughts and feelings), will take on emotional colorations and overtones. Done correctly, this isn’t manipulative, it’s a genuine, shared response to emotional truths that run deeper than the fabrication of the fiction. And dry, unemotional narrative can often leave a reader cold, feeling detached from the characters and what happens to them.

The Last Word(s)...

Vivid writing grabs readers’ attention and draws them into your story — and showing your audience the action you create is a vital aspect of vivid storytelling. So, in order to avoid the pitfalls of “telling” rather than “showing,” remember these points:

- Use strong, specific verbs, and avoid overusing adverbs.
- Provoke emotion through character reactions and vivid writing, don’t simply tell readers how to feel.
- Use well-placed details to bring scenes to life.
- Use expressive dialogue to show characters’ emotions and attitudes.

Keep these notions in mind and your writing is sure to be more powerful and compelling — the sort of thing that will keep readers coming back for more.

For more on this subject, see my article about **TRANSPARENT MINIMALISM** in this website’s archives.



R. Michael Burns is a member of the Colorado Springs Fiction Writer’s Group. He is currently instructing students in Japan. Mr. Burns’ Publications have included the short story “Celia” in *Bell Book and Beyond* and others.