"Telling" is a way of conveying facts to the reader—the wrong way. The right way is to "show" information through the use of action, dialogue, and the five senses. (If you're still confused, please read on and let me "show" you what I mean.)

Imagine yourself in a darkened movie theater. All of a sudden the screen goes black and you can hear only the sound track—the dialogue and a few sound effects. How frustrated you'd be! If the technician didn’t get the projector fixed fast, you’d get bored and leave. The same is true for books. If you fail to make the reader see your story, she'll lose interest, put down the book, and never pick it up again. If that reader happens to be the editor to whom you’ve submitted your manuscript, then you’ve lost a sale.

What is the magic technique that breathes life into any story? It’s the golden rule of successful writing: "Show, Don’t Tell."

"Telling" means you haven’t involved the reader. You’ve given her information, but in a dull and lifeless manner. You’ve left out the action, emotion, and sensory detail—all the vital ingredients that make the reader believe in your story.

"Showing" dramatizes the events of your plot. The reader experiences the story as if she’s right there, participating in the story. In her imagination, she becomes the character. Here’s an example:

**Telling:** Jack was afraid.

**Showing:** As the footsteps tapped closer and closer, Jack felt his stomach muscles tighten. He flattened himself to the wall, the bricks gritty against his cheek. Sweat chilled his palms. He used both hands to steady the gun.

Notice in the "telling" statement, we’re given information, but in a way that doesn’t involve us in any scene. It’s as if we’re sitting in that movie theater, staring at a black screen and growing increasingly annoyed by our inability to see what’s happening.

In the "showing" version, however, we undergo the scene along with Jack. We hear the tap of footsteps. We feel the tension in his stomach, the cold dampness of his hands, the grittiness of the brick. We see the gun in his shaking hands. We live his fear, rather than merely being told of it.

And along the way, something miraculous happens: Jack becomes a real person. Even if he’s the bad guy, we can empathise with him because we experience his fear, and fear is a universal human emotion. We want to turn the page and find out what happens to Jack. This is the power of "showing" instead of "telling."

So what is the secret to "showing" a scene? It’s beautifully simple. Use specific details.

Specific details breathe life into your story. They stimulate the reader's imagination so she can project herself into the scene and become a part of it. By the way, watch out whenever you name an emotion, such as Jack was afraid. It’s lazy writing. The reader won’t feel the emotional impact. How much better it is to "show" the emotion through action, the five senses, and dialogue. Here’s another example.

**Telling:** Dave thought Brenda was acting secretive.

**Showing:** Brenda slammed his dresser drawer shut and spun around, her hands hidden behind her back. Her lips jerked into a stiff smile. "Dave! I-I thought you wouldn't be home until six o'clock."
The "showing" example uses physical action, facial expression, and dialogue to convey the same information as the "telling" statement. But with "showing," we get a vivid picture. We watch the scene as if it were playing on a movie screen.

If you were writing this scene, you’d start by defining what Brenda is doing to make Dave think her behavior is secretive. She slams his drawer shut. (Specific detail) She keeps her hands hidden behind her back. (Another specific detail) Her smile is stiff. Her dialogue further indicates that she's concealing something from him—likely she was snooping in his drawer. She might even be holding something of his in her hands. We want to read on to find out!

So, "showing" makes a scene come alive through the use of details. But what about broader applications of the "Show, Don't Tell" rule? What if an editor rejects your manuscript because you're "telling" your characters, rather than "showing" them?

To illustrate this common mistake, suppose your hero is a gambler. But never once during the course of the book do we see him pick up a deck of cards. We never hear him wager any money. We're expected to believe this character trait on faith. Without any proof. This type of "telling" can earn you a fast rejection!

While looking at your own manuscript, ask yourself: What can I show this character doing so that his essence, or function, in the story is clear to the reader? For example, my heroine in Once Upon A Scandal (St. Martin’s, September 1997) is a lady cat burglar in Regency London. Instead of simply "telling" that information to the reader, I "showed" the heroine acting in the function of burglar in the opening scene of the book:

It was the perfect night for thievery.

As she climbed out the attic window and onto the third story ledge, Emma felt blessed by luck. The fog hid her presence high atop the row of elegant town houses. The dense mist also kept her from seeing how far she could fall. Hugging the brick wall, she inched her way toward the home of her quarry. Only the faintest glow from the lower windows penetrated the darkness. The soup-thick moisture in the air gave the illusion of solidity, as if she could step off her perch and sink into a black feathered bed . . . .

Emma shuddered. One false step, and she would break her neck. This narrow shelf was intended as decoration, not as a walkway for the Bond Street Burglar.

Character growth is another potential danger zone for "telling" instead of "showing." Let’s say your woman-hating hero has been locking horns with the heroine for 200 or 300 pages or more when suddenly in the final scene he announces that he loves her after all, and didn’t she know it? This is "telling," not "showing." The reader won't believe it unless you’ve used scenes within the framework of your story to "show" his gradual transformation from cynic to sensitive guy.

So take a good, close look at how you present your characters. Have you merely "told" the reader that your heroine is compassionate—or have you "shown" this trait through her actions? Write a scene where she rescues a dog from a gang of bullies or makes chicken soup for a bedridden neighbor. Likewise, don't "tell" the reader your hero is a daredevil. "Show" him jumping off a moving train or challenging the villain to a duel. That's what "showing" is all about, using action and dialogue and specific details to make the reader believe these characters are who you say they are.

All good books touch the reader on an emotional level. You do so by giving proof to the reader—proof of how this character acts and reacts when faced by trial and tribulation. In other words, you "show" the reader why we should cheer for the character or boo her. And hopefully, in the process, readers will find themselves drawn into the story, unable to put the book down.

And that's the "telling" truth.

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