



## WHAT IS SHOWING VS TELLING?

### MY TAKE:

Showing is putting the reader in the scene so they can see, hear, taste, touch, and smell what the character sees, hears, tastes, touches, and smells. Showing creates a picture in our mind as well as connecting us to the character and scene.

As readers, we become *engaged* in the story, we feel we are *in* it, because we are experiencing things along with the character.

## EXAMPLES OF TELLING

- Jenny was very happy.
- This was probably THE most important game of Josh's basketball career. He had to sink this shot. He was nervous but he really hoped he could do it.

## EXAMPLES OF SHOWING

TELLING: Jenny was very happy.

SHOWING: Jenny pumped her fists in the air, grinning as she jumped up and down.

TELLING: This was probably THE most important game of Josh's basketball career. He had to sink this shot. He was nervous but he really hoped he could do it.

SHOWING: Josh's breath was quick and shallow, his hands damp as he palmed the basketball at the free throw line. The hoop seemed fifteen miles away, not fifteen feet, the hoop shrunken and distant.

Championship.

*Don't think about it.*

One shot.

*Don't think about it.*



## WHAT DOES SHOWING DO?

- Showing adds emotion and immediacy. It tells us about the characters – who they are, what they care about, which in turn tells us, the reader, what we should care about.

OUR JOB AS WRITERS IS TO GET OUR READERS TO **FEEL**,  
TO **CARE** about our characters and what happens to them!

## ELEMENTS OF GOOD SHOWING

- Strong dialogue that shows relationships between characters, how they feel, and what they are thinking.
- Strong action verbs that put us into the action.
- Vivid descriptions that make us see, feel, hear, smell, and taste where we are in time and place.

## WHEN TO TELL AND NOT SHOW

Obviously, there will be times when you want to tell something rather than show it. You can't show everything or your story or book would be way too long and also there are some things that you can just state outright and move on with the story.

When do you tell instead of show? When you need to:

- summarize a scene or situation.
- transition the story (show the passage of time, change the setting or location)
- provide a piece of information but that information doesn't necessarily move the plot along or give us more insight into the character(s). In this case, one sentence could convey the information and then you can move on to the next scene.

## TELLING EXAMPLE #1: SUMMARIZING

They said their good-byes, then Marla jumped into her car, waving as she told them to be careful.

We don't need to hear those good-byes or Marla telling them to be careful and them saying they will. We just need to know they said good-bye and she took off after telling them to be careful.

Now, if the good-bye was important – perhaps they wouldn't see Marla for a long time and this impacted the story in some way – the writer would probably expand on this. Or if the “be careful” was ominous – the characters were about to embark on a dangerous quest, we might want to hear the fear in Marla's voice, see and feel the reaction of the character when she says, “Be careful.” But here, those things aren't going on so we don't need to experience all of it.



## TELLING EXAMPLE #2: TRANSITION

The next day they arrived in Denver and it was snowing.

This sentence tells us we've moved not only in time (the next day) but also in location (to Denver). If nothing of important happened on the trip – no one fought or died or found out a secret – then we don't need to be shown the actual trip. We just need to move the characters from one place to another and have the day pass.

## TELLING EXAMPLE #3: INFO DUMP

His mother was no longer angry.

We need this piece of information and now we can move on. We don't need to see how she isn't angry (how her face might have softened, her voice was calmer, etc). We just need to know she isn't angry so we can move on.

## FIND YOUR OWN EXAMPLES OF SHOW & TELL

As you read stories and books as a writer, see if you can identify where the author shows or tells and try to determine why s/he chose to do so at that particular time.

## YOUR TURN

**FRIENDSHIP:** Sierra was so mad at her friend Katrina. Sierra told her sister, Erica, how she couldn't believe that Katrina would share the news of her crush on Mark when she'd specifically asked her not to tell anyone. She thought she might have to kill her. Or at least put trash in her locker or something.

**FEAR OF HEIGHTS:** Jamie was afraid of heights. He stood at the end of a huge log stretched out over a river. His group leader – and his entire group – expected him to cross to the other side. He wasn't going to do it and no one was going to make him. They kept encouraging him like they really thought he could do it, but he just stood there, staring down at the rushing water.

**BEING CHASED:** Molly and Ed made it over the fence with Ed snagging his jacket. The dogs were close behind. They could hear them barking. Molly and Ed were scared of getting caught. But they were more scared of not being able to find their mother, who was the only one who knew the truth that could set them free for good. They kept going, entering the forest where they hoped they could lose the dogs.

**POLICE STATION:** The police officer made Hannah sit in the chair next to his desk and he asked her a bunch of questions about the robbery. She gave him her answers and waited for her parents to show up. She was nervous, but didn't want to show it. The cop seemed annoyed at her and she didn't know why. She hadn't done anything wrong. It had been Jackie and Paulina's idea. She'd just gone along with it. They were sitting with other cops, probably saying it was all her fault.

**DAD IN HOSPITAL:** Randy was scared and nervous. The nurse came up and told him his dad was asking for him. But she didn't know they'd gotten in a fight last night and he'd told his dad he hated him. His dad had left angry last night and run a red light. Randy didn't think he could face him right now. His mother came up and said he should come into the room, but Randy said no.



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