



IFW INSTITUTE FOR WRITERS



ICL INSTITUTE OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

WRITER'S TOOLKIT

Show Don't Tell

Some time ago, my son was assigned *The Prince and the Pauper* to read. It was his first book by Mark Twain. When I asked him what he thought of it, he replied, "It's good. For the first time, I can picture the scenes in color."

As a mother, I was pleased. As a writer, I was impressed. In that innocent/wise way children often have, my son was saying that Twain knew how to bring stories to life, how to make them vivid and real in the minds of his readers.

It may not be entirely coincidental that Mark Twain was born in Missouri, the "show-me" state. Showing has it all over telling when it comes to drawing a reader into a fictional world.

Imagine a young girl expecting her first blind date at any moment. "He's so cute!" the cousin who arranged the date has told her. "He's so funny! I just know you two will get along."

Is the girl as confident about all that as her cousin? No, she's not. She's waiting for proof. She's waiting to be shown. How cute? How funny? In what way? What does he look like? How will he act? What will he say?

The bell rings. She runs to answer it. The door opens, and there stands . . . an exact replica of every girl's Prince Charming? King of the Nerds? The Frog Prince?

They're all cute. They're all funny. And they're all different. Telling is one thing. Showing is quite another.

SDT

Sounds like a food additive, doesn't it? It's not. Those three letters are editorial shorthand for a helpful reminder to writers of stories, books, poems, plays, and articles: "Show; don't tell." And yes, that's editorial shorthand, as in professional editors—commenting on manuscripts being readied for publication by professional writers.

Even the best of us get carried away by our ideas, our characters, and their conflicts. We are so eager to share our excitement we hurriedly tell our stories instead of showing them. Editors see too much of this, and they're tired of spelling it out. Hence, SDT.

Here's an example of *telling*:

She was angry.

We know something about this character because we know something about anger. But are we really there with her? Do we feel involved? Not very.

Now an example of *showing*:

She stormed out the back door, slamming it shut behind her. Gripping the doll by its neck, she sent it sailing off the porch. Her eyes flashed as the doll hit the garage wall with a thud. Only when it had fallen limply to the ground did she lower her arm and unclench her fists.

I described what happened, leaving you to draw your own conclusions about the character's mental state from your own experience. What could be more convincing than taking you there and letting you see for yourself? (You'll notice that showing takes more space than telling. Keep this in mind in your planning stage.)

SDT. It's the difference between attending a wonderful party—or having someone describe it to you the next day. Being there is better!

So, think of it this way: Your main character is throwing a party—the story. She's asked you to take charge of the guest of honor—the reader. Your job—as the writer—is to pick him up and get him there, introduce him around, steer him toward people and situations he'll enjoy (and away from those he won't), see that he tastes the refreshments, smells the rose garden, and generally has a terrific time.

How? By using action, dialogue, and sensory images. Not all apply to every situation. It's a matter of mix and match. Let's look at them one at a time.

Action

You've already seen an example of using action to show emotion. "She was angry" comes to life when we see what a character does when she's angry. Look:

Billy had a crush on Jen, but he was too shy to talk to her.

See anything? No—there's nothing to see. That's telling. We do have some idea of what's going on. For one thing, just knowing our characters' names helps. For another, we all relate easily to young love and feeling shy. But what we have here is still flat—a report on the party, not an invitation to join in. Look again:

For twenty-five minutes, Billy paced the icy sidewalk, hugging himself against the north wind. Finally, the light in the second-story window of the house across the street went out. Billy fumbled in his jacket pocket. Was the bracelet still there?

Yes!

A moment later, Jen's dad came out the front door and headed down the steps to his car. Behind him came Jen, her dance bag slapping against her jeans as she hurried after him.

In the same instant, Billy's carefully prepared speech about the lost bracelet evaporated. Instead of crossing the street toward Jen, he turned up the collar of his jacket and scurried away.

Ah, now you can see! No one has to tell you Jen's important to Billy. He wouldn't spend all that time pacing in the cold if she weren't. No need to announce that he's afraid to talk to her. You saw him yourself, scurrying away at the very sight of her. Added to what you know about young love and shyness is what you now know in particular about Billy, his feelings, and how he acts upon those feelings.

There's a bonus in showing rather than telling. We've managed some character development. What Billy does in the throes of first love and shyness sets him apart from all other shy people in love. He's not a foot-shuffler and stammerer, at least not yet. He doesn't even get close enough for that!

We've also indicated important sources of conflict in his life: an outer problem that has to do with Jen, and an inner problem that has to do with his shyness in general.

Finally, by showing him in a particular time and place, we've begun to develop a setting—the street on which he spends time watching Jen's house and pining over her.

Dialogue

Is there a human being alive who can resist eavesdropping? When a voice is raised somewhere down the aisle of a bus, it doesn't matter at all that it's the voice of a stranger. We can't help tuning in. There's a drama unfolding, a living story. And we as a species do love a story!

Dramatic dialogue in a written story is as irresistible as that raised voice on the bus. Children in particular prefer it to long narrative passages because it brings them right into the middle of things, an exciting place to be. Listen:

My dad and I were always arguing.

Hear anything? No. Whatever this first-person narrator and his or her dad are yelling at each other is completely out of earshot. It's also so generalized that we're tempted to doubt it—always arguing? Listen:

"My band is not a whim, Dad," I tried to explain for what had to be the tenth time. "We're good. And the Spring Formal is our first paying gig. I'm not asking you to give us the new amplifiers. I just need a . . ."

"I've never liked those drums of yours, Paul, and you know it," Dad interrupted. "That's no life for you, hanging out with bums."

"Musicians are not bums!" I protested. "We work hard at what we do."

"You call banging a couple of sticks around work? What I do is work," Dad insisted.

"Every man in this family has earned his living by the sweat of his brow. And we are proud of it."

"Every time I talk to you," I said, "all I ever hear about is every other man in this family. I'm not every other man in this family, Dad. I'm not a factory worker. I'm a musician. I'm me."

Dad's fist hit the tabletop.

Hear anything now? I should say so! You've got a front row seat for the main event. And you have a clearer picture of when and how Paul and his father argue, and what about. You've also learned something about who they are and where they stand on certain issues. Once again, because showing is specific—this is one argument at one particular time—the need for a setting becomes obvious and is easy to fit in.

Sensory Images

We experience the real world through our senses. Deprived of one or two, we can still manage by sharpening the others. But deprived of all of them—our abilities to see, hear, taste, touch, and smell—we'd have no way of knowing where we left off and the furniture or flowers began. Awake and asleep, we depend on our senses to define us and the world in which we live.

It follows logically, then, that we experience fictional worlds through our senses. I'm sure you've known that marvelous feeling of being so totally absorbed in a story it becomes more real to you than your surroundings. The phone rings and you have to reorient yourself: *Where am I? What time is it? Oh, no! I forgot to pick up the kids!*

How do writers do that? It's magical, but it's not magic. It's technique. The more a reader's senses are involved, the more real that story world will be.

We've already discussed involving two of those senses: sight and sound. Action involves the mind's eye, while dialogue appeals to the ear. Those are the senses we're most aware of in real life as well as in fiction. They work wonders in two ways—they bring the story to life and they move it forward. What characters do and say develops into plot.

Taste, touch, and smell certainly enhance both real life and fiction, but they must be used with discretion. You wouldn't want to coat a meal with cayenne pepper or douse yourself with bottles of perfume. Nor do you want to interrupt your story for the touch of every snowflake or the taste of each french fry.

Observe:

Her room was a mess.

It's a familiar situation, perhaps, but there's not much data for the senses here. Observe again:

Peggy snuggled into the soft, fuzzy mound of teddy bears and pillows. Her hand groped toward the pizza teetering in its gaping box close to the edge of her bed. The spicy aroma made her nose twitch.

Her favorite song blasted a steady beat into her head from a tiny pink speaker on her night table. No one would complain about the music today, or the comic books and get-well cards cluttering the floor of her room, or the army of smelly socks and sneakers hiding under her bed. Peggy grinned down at the clean white cast on her leg. She was the luckiest kid in the fifth grade.

With a sigh, she stuffed double cheese and extra pepperoni into her mouth and thought about calling for another soda.

Here we have the senses, all five of them adding up to a vivid scene. It takes more thought, time, and effort than “Her room was a mess,” but isn’t it worth it? And once again, there are dividends:

- **Character development.** When I began writing this scene, I had no idea who Peggy was or what kind of mess I’d find in her room. Suddenly there was a pizza....and a pink speaker...and get-well cards on the floor. Hmm. Was she sick? But wait. What about a cast? She’s broken her leg. And she’s glad! Why? Is she taking advantage of everyone’s sympathy? How long will their patience last? Is Peggy heading from smugness to trouble? Trouble! That means
- **Conflict.** To my surprise and delight, the room contains the hint of a problem on which a story might be built. Peggy may just call for one soda too many! I intended only to write a description of a scene here, but I may have to stick around for a story.

Showing instead of telling makes the elements of a story happen—for the writer as well as the reader. Character, conflict, and setting practically beg to be included. Plot sets itself rolling. It’s another party, and the writer is invited.

- **SDT.** Beginner and pro alike, we need reminding from time to time. As writers we can hardly wait to get a story told. But as readers we’re all from Missouri: We may say “Tell me a story,” but what we really mean is “Show me.”

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