

“Show, Don’t (Just) Tell”



7 Simple but Effective Tips for More Engaging, Persuasive Writing

(<http://jerz.setonhill.edu/writing/creative1/showing/>, 11-2-12) [Jerz](#) > [Writing](#) > [Creative](#) [Heller insertions]

Posted by Dennis G. Jerz, on March 30th, 2011

Don't just *tell* me your brother is talented...
show me what he can do, and let me decide
whether I'm impressed.

To convince your readers, **show**,
don't just **tell** them what you want them to know.

There. I've just *told* you something.
Pretty boring, huh? Now, let me *show* you.

My brother *is* talented.

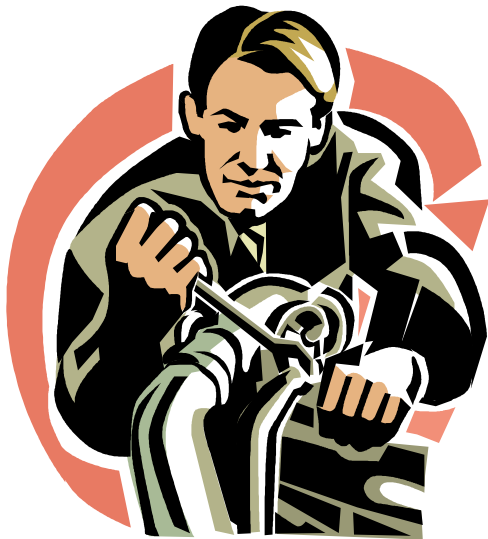
There's nothing informative,
or engaging, or compelling
about this sentence.



You have no reason to believe or disbelieve me,
and no reason to care.

(TELLING is boring and unconvincing.)
[Note the use of a linking verb.]

My brother **modifies** sports car engines,
competes in ballroom dance tournaments,
and **analyzes** chess algorithms.



My brother **modifies sports car engines,
competes in ballroom dance tournaments,
and **analyzes** chess algorithms.**

“Wow, that guy is talented,” you say to yourself. You didn’t need me to TELL you what you’re supposed to think, because I carefully chose those details.

(They SHOW you the range of my brother’s talents.)

[SHOWING immerses the reader in the experience;
TELLING keeps the reader at a distance.

Note the use of three action verbs.]

“Show, Don’t (Just) Tell”

Contents

1. Choose Specific Details That Show Your Point
2. Give the Reader a Reason to Feel Your Emotions
3. Provide Engaging Details That Imply the Main Point
4. Show with Informative Details and/or Emotional Language
5. “Telling” States Facts; “Showing” Invites Deeper Understanding
6. Showing Prefers the Specific to the General
7. Sometimes, “Telling” Is Good

1) Choose Specific Details That *Show* Your Point

You won't need to write a boring, uninformative and unpersuasive sentence like

“Texting while driving is bad”

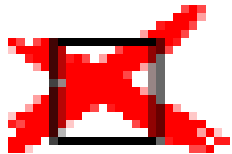
if you can instead SHOW your point, through **well-chosen details** (such as statistics, specific examples, or personal stories) that SHOW in a persuasive way.



Let's consider this point:

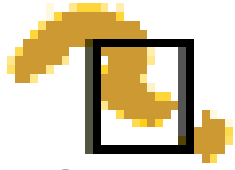
“This tired child needs a nap.”

That's pretty dry, so let's try to make it more vivid and persuasive.



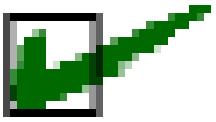
“The little girl looked so tired, she clearly needed a nap.”

This sentence gets right to the point, but nothing about it engages the imagination or makes the reader want to keep reading.



“The brown-eyed little girl wore a plastic Viking cap, and her mouth was sticky from candy. Standing there in her dress-up clothes, she looked more tired than I had ever seen a child look. But she was so very stubborn, I saw we were headed for a battle.”

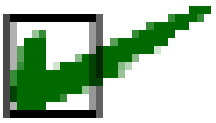
This version mentions the **author’s reaction**: this child is tired. It also offers a **motive**: the author must get her to take a nap. **But** what does wearing a Viking cap or having brown eyes have to do with being tired? These random **details do give the reader something to work with** — something to flesh out the bare claim, **but the details don’t actually contribute to the main point.**



Her sleepy brown eyes hardened into red-rimmed slits. She cocked her plastic Viking helmet aggressively, the horns sticking out only a little more than her curls. One fist clutched a decapitated lollipop, the other a cardboard sword. She leveled the point at my chest.

“You mean dragon!” she growled. “You’ll *never* make me nap!”

Now that I’ve **added more battle-related details** (the sword, the dragon, the “decapitated lollipop”), the Viking hat makes a little more sense, **and we get the idea that we’re about to face an epic temper tantrum.** The details provided in this version all **SHOW** the reader what’s at stake. **But the “brown” in “sleepy brown eyes” is just a random detail, and could easily be cut.** The important details, however, provide clues that you can assemble, so that you say to yourself, “Wow, that little girl is stubborn, and she sure needs that nap!”



Her sleepy brown eyes **hardened** into red-rimmed slits. She **cocked** her plastic Viking helmet aggressively, the horns sticking out only a little more than her curls. One fist **clutched** a decapitated lollipop, the other a cardboard sword. She **leveled** the point at my chest.

“You mean dragon!” she **growled**. “You’ll *never* **make** me nap!”

Notice the use of action verbs and the absence of linking verbs. Notice the sensory details.

But what if, when you read that version,
the message you get is completely different?

You might say to yourself,

“That horrible girl deserves a spanking,” or “I hope
naptime battles don’t crush her creative spunk.”

The point is, you are interpreting what the details
show, you are building on those details — you are
engaging with the examples in a meaningful way.

For a given writing task,
if communicating a precise, factual, word-for-word message (such as “the red zone is for immediate loading and unloading of passengers only”) is more important than engaging the reader’s emotions, imagination, and/or intellect, then in that case,
telling is more efficient than showing.

[NOTE: Telling takes a more prominent role in expository writing...but not in description.]

But showing specific examples can help drive home the message you’ve told. Thus, the title of this page is “Show, Don’t (*Just*) Tell,” not “Show, Don’t Tell.

2) Give the Reader a Reason to Feel Your Emotions



If you are writing a set of [instructions](#) or a [professional e-mail](#), you don't want to tease the reader by SHOWING indirectly.

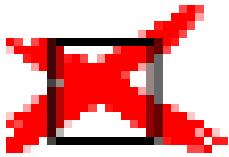
To convey complex technical details, TELL ("insert tab A into slot B") and be done with it.





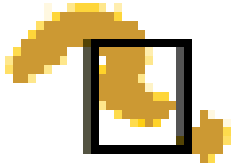
But if you want to **engage the reader's heart, mind, and imagination**, **SHOW** with vivid details that generate, in your reader, the emotions you want to express.

Rather than classify and list all the emotions that YOU felt, use specific details that **give the READER a reason to feel those emotions.**



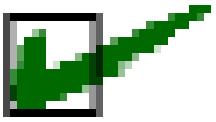
“I’ll never forget how I felt after Fido died. I was miserable.”

Simply ***naming the feelings*** that you experienced (***telling*** your reader what you felt) is not enough to create interest in the reader. Can you find a way to generate, in your reader, the same feelings that you experienced?



“If I live for a thousand years, I’ll never forget how *utterly and terribly alone* I felt after Fido died. *Months and months* went by, and it seemed that *every little thing* reminded me of him. I don’t know whether I am ever going to get over his death.”

While the author has ***added specific details***, those details merely *assist the telling* – they don’t actually give the reader a **reason** to love Fido, and to suffer along with the writer. [Avoid clichés like “if I live for a thousand years.” Be original.]



“Whenever puppies in the pet store window distracted me from our walk, Fido flattened his scruffy ears, growling. But he always forgave me. As his sight faded, the smell of fresh air and the feel of grass would make him try to caper. Eventually, at the sound of my voice, his tail thumped weakly on the ground. This morning, I filled his water bowl all the way to the top—just the way he likes it—before I remembered.”



Reading this last revision (sniff!) always makes me sad. These carefully chosen details help us to understand the **relationship** between the pet and his owner.

- We see the dog is jealous of puppies, we see that he grows increasingly weak, and we see the author is still in the habit of caring for this dog.
- We don't need to know what color the dog is or how cute his nose is (just as we don't need to know what the author looks like).

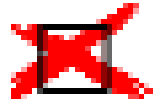


Because the author does not supply a sentence that announces, “I loved Fido and still can’t believe he’s gone,” the reader is left to make that connection.



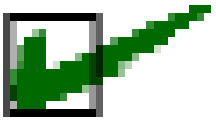
That means the reader has to engage with the author’s details, and becomes more intellectually and emotionally engaged in the story as a result.

3) Encourage the Reader's Involvement: Show Details that Imply the Main Point



“From the way she behaved in the crowded restaurant, you could tell was attracted to the cute stranger in the black shirt. She tried a few things to get his attention, and eventually she thought she succeeded.”

The author wastes no time providing the information, but the story is very thin... nothing interesting seems to be happening.



That stranger had been scanning the room, and this time, Sally thought his eyes flickered in her direction. Wait — was that a half smile? Had he just put his hand on his heart? Or was he just brushing something off of his shirt? That shirt looked soft. Sally smiled.

“He’s kind of cute,” her roommate giggled. Sally casually looked away, twirling a curl.

“Oh, I don’t know,” she said, letting her eyes rest on the artwork, the flowers, a random face in the crowd, and found another excuse to laugh. Carefully turning her profile, she crossed her legs like her friends had practiced in middle school. *That ought to do it*, she thought.



The reader is left to figure out what's going on, which is more engaging for a story.

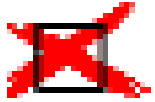
There is tension, and even a bit of character development.

The original version of Sally's story **tells** me a few specific but isolated details — for instance, the color of the stranger's shirt. But is that detail important? (It's not.) Without coming right out and saying "Sally was attracted to the man," the revision **shows** a series of different details (Sally notices the shirt, then wonders what it feels like) that come together to form a pattern— but the author does not come right out and announce what the pattern means.



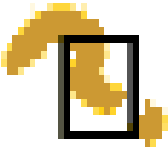
Is Sally a sultry temptress at an embassy dinner, or a knobby-kneed waif about to embarrass herself at a high school dance? At this point, we can only imagine — and that keeps us reading.

4) Show with Informative Details and/or Emotional Language



Telling (No Details): “I like many different sports, from skiing to rock-climbing, but when it comes right down to it, I would have to say that ping-pong is my favorite sport.”

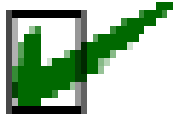
Snooze. This kind of writing can help you meet a word count, but it really boils down to “I like ping-pong.” All the rest is filler. There’s nothing in this passage that expresses how the author feels about ping-pong, and nothing that informs or persuades the reader.



Telling (Dry Details): “Ping-pong is a really interesting sport. Casual players may find it relaxing, but to get really good, you need manual dexterity, agility and endurance.”



While the author has added details, those details merely *assist the telling* – this passage still starts out with “I like ping-pong.” A reader who doesn’t already love ping-pong will have no reason to change his or her mind.

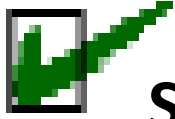


Showing with Informative Detail:

“Ping-pong may look like a relaxing pastime, but for experts, winning the game requires manual dexterity, agility, and endurance.”



While there’s nothing particularly engaging in this opening, if the rest of the paper demonstrates that, in order to make the transition from “relaxing pastime” to “winning the game,” you need “dexterity,” “agility” and “endurance,” then you see that this sentence isn’t just a random list of stuff to talk about. This opening line isn’t just throat-clearing or filler — it’s a carefully chosen table of contents, mentioning the topic of each of the supporting paragraphs.

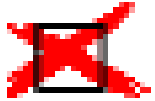


Showing with Emotional Language:

“He’s drenched in sweat, his knuckles are white, he’s on the other side of the ping-pong table, and I’m about to bring him down.”

There’s no need for the author of the last sample to write, “I like ping-pong” or “ping-pong is more serious than you think,” because the vivid details all **show** these points. The fact that the opponent is sweating means you need endurance. The fact that his knuckles are white suggests he’s nervous. The author’s claim “I’m about to bring him down” suggests that attitude and psychology play a role in ping-pong. This document might not be as technically or factually informative as the “Showing with Detail” paragraph, **but** if your goal is to convey the idea that ping-pong is worthy of serious attention, then you might motivate your reader to reconsider their opinion of the game.

- 5) “Telling” states facts or observations.
“Showing” invites much deeper understanding.



All the kids knew that Lucinda was the meanest kid in the third grade. She was prissy and cute, and she thought that meant she could get away with anything. She would always go out of her way to torment me. I wasn't one of the “cool” kids, and the few kids I knew were just the guys I played chess with during recess — they weren't really friends. Plus, I was clumsy, so I was a good target. She tormented me so much she made the third grade a living hell.

Okay, we understand the author wants us to think Lucinda is mean, but we don't actually see her *do* anything. Is she aggressively, deliberately mean, or is the narrator a whiner-baby? There's not enough information for us to know (or care).

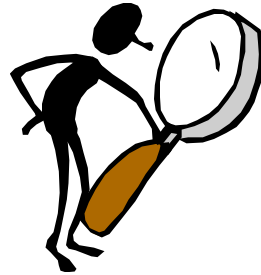


“When the recess bell rang, I grabbed my chess set and dashed to freedom, eager to win the daily tournament of outcasts. I didn’t look, but I knew Lucinda was watching, I could feel her curly locks swaying as her head tracked me. Of course, I tripped in the doorway. Tennis shoes and sandals stepped around me as I scrambled after pawns and bishops. And there was Lucinda, waiting for me to notice her. She smiled, lifted her shiny patent-leather shoe, and slowly, carefully ground her heel right on the head of my white queen.”

Here, we read a detailed account of Lucinda’s behavior (she has a habit of going “after” the narrator; she waits until she has the narrator’s attention before crushing his queen), and we can judge for ourselves.



Both passages make the same point, but the second does a much better job of **engaging the reader**.



The **second passage focuses in detail on one *specific event***. Instead of simply calling himself clumsy (as in the first passage), the author shows us one specific occasion when he trips, and the writing brings us down to the ground with him, so that we see what he sees and feel what he feels.

The second passage never comes out and says

“I didn’t have any friends,”

but the fact that nobody stops to help the narrator makes us gather that the guy is an outcast. We learn quite a bit about the author in just that passage.

Ultimately, there is no need to call Lucinda mean in the second passage because that concept is conveyed effectively by the surprising detail of the shiny patent-leather shoe crushing the queen. There is no **deadwood** — it is packed with details, creating a more vivid emotional picture than the first one.

“When the recess bell rang, I grabbed my chess set and dashed to freedom, eager to win the daily tournament of outcasts. I didn’t look, but I knew Lucinda was watching, I could feel her curly locks swaying as her head tracked me. Of course, I tripped in the doorway. Tennis shoes and sandals stepped around me as I scrambled after pawns and bishops. And there was Lucinda, waiting for me to notice her. She smiled, lifted her shiny patent-leather shoe, and slowly, carefully ground her heel right on the head of my white queen.”

We actually learn something about Lucinda — she is not just being mean, **she wants the narrator’s attention, too.**

Notice that she attacked the queen, of all pieces.

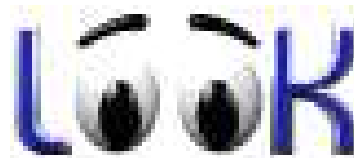
Does she consider the chess set to be her competition?



6) Showing Prefers the Specific to the General

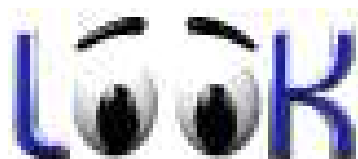


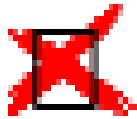
He looked at me in a way that wasn't exactly threatening, but still made me uncomfortable.



This is just a fancier way of *telling* the reader a feeling by stating something that happened and spelling out exactly what effect it had on you. What, exactly, did this guy do with his eyes, face, and body that made you uncomfortable? Describe his actions, and show your reader exactly what made you uncomfortable.

- **Did he waggle his eyebrows at you in a vaguely sensual manner?**
- **Did he stare directly at you while taking a gigantic bite out of a chicken wing, so that bits of cartilage crunched in his mouth as he chewed?**
- **Did he keep glancing up at a point just above your head, as if something was about to drop on you, and then laugh when you looked up to see for yourself?**





Clearly, something must be done about this terrible crisis.

[Avoid qualifiers and intensifiers. They show doubt.]

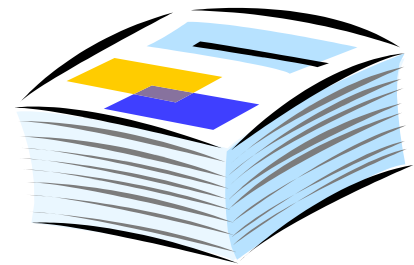
The words “clearly” or variations (“nobody can doubt that...” or “as we all know”) are often signs that the writer isn’t entirely sure the point that follows is persuasive enough.

Instead of just announcing that a certain thing is “terrible” or “horrendous” or “the most hideous thing you can possibly imagine” and expecting your reader to believe you, a good writer should present evidence (vivid examples) that lead the reader to conclude, on his or her own, that this thing is terrible.

7) Sometimes, “Telling” Is Good

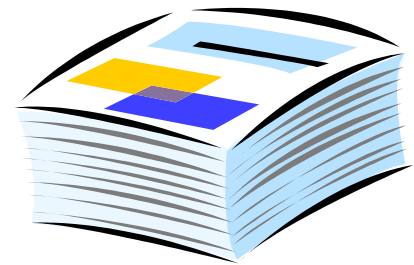
When our goal is simply to **inform**, **NOT** to persuade or engage, TELLING does the job quite well — particularly if it’s part of an overall strategy.

[NOTE: Description ... storytelling ... must engage.]



That's the reason I didn't call this handout "Show, Don't Tell" — I called it "Show, Don't (Just) Tell" because it's perfectly acceptable to TELL the minor details that add up to the point [NOTE the "minor details that ADD UP to the point] you want to SHOW. [NOTE—the PURPOSE and STYLE become MORE important in TELLING].

In fact, it's necessary to TELL.



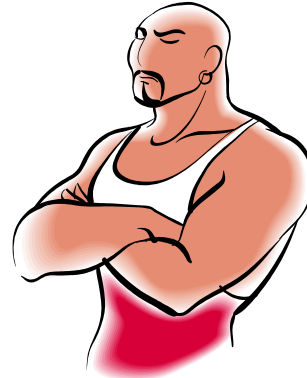
For instance, in the opening example, I simply TOLD you that my brother modifies sports engines. I could have **SHOWN** his interest in cars instead: **“His hands are grease-stained, he owns NASCAR posters, and on Saturday afternoons, he’s usually under his car.”**

But to SHOW you his interest in cars, I had to TELL you details about his hands, how he decorates his house, and what he does with his time.

I carefully chose what details to TELL, expecting those details to add up in a meaningful way that SHOWS you something in an engaging way.

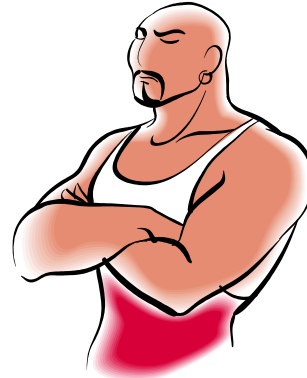
[NOTE: SHOWING usually means avoiding linking and helping verbs. It means using action verbs. Always choose powerful action verbs.]

☑️ “Our coach is a former champion wrestler, but now he is overpaid, overweight, and over forty.” –[Dena Taylor](#)

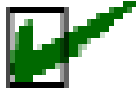


This example TELLS a **string of details, carefully organized** [NOTE the string, note the details, note the importance of organization] for humorous effect — and the speaker’s choice to present the coach this way gives us a glimpse of their relationship.

☑️ “Our coach is a former champion wrestler, but now he is overpaid, overweight, and over forty.” –[Dena Taylor](#)



Based on the speaker’s attitude, how do you think the team has been faring so far this season? What relationship does the speaker have with the coach? The combination of details and tone SHOW far more than what any individual detail TELLS. This is an excellent use of TELLING minor details in order to SHOW a bigger point.

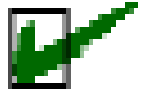


“These are the times that try men’s souls.”

–*Thomas Paine*



In stark contrast to the flowery language in political tracts designed for the nobility, Tom Paine uses **stark, plain language** to engage the common citizen. Later in the piece, he SHOWS with details exactly why he feels men’s souls are tried, and he persuades his audience what they should do about it. But here, he is TELLING something that the audience already agrees with, so that he can capture their attention and get them to listen to his bigger points.



“I am your father.” — *Darth Vader*

The bluntness of this statement adds to the dramatic punch as Luke reacts to the news in “The Empire Strikes Back.”

