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## A Game of Show and Tell

**Your probably remember this from kindergarten.** You brought in something from home, stood up in front of your class, showed them what you brought, and told a few things about it. That was “show and tell.” But what if you forgot to bring something from home and you still had to get up and tell people about it? You’d have to “show” them with your words by describing it.

In writing, we often say that “showing” is better than just “telling.” Here are a few reasons why:

- **Showing is more specific than telling.** You could tell about the weather by writing, “The weather was really bad.” But it might be better if you “showed” instead: “A harsh wind whipped through the trees. Dark clouds poured down buckets of rain that overran the gutters and spilled onto the sidewalks.”
- **Showing helps readers make pictures in their minds.** As the writer, you know what you “see” in your mind as you write. But all your readers have is your words. If you don’t “show” them what you’re talking about, they won’t get the same pictures in their mind that you have in yours.
- **Showing is more interesting than telling.** You could write something like “My dog is cool.” Or, you could describe all the things that make your dog so cool and let the readers figure out how cool your dog is all by themselves. This makes readers more interested in your writing because they want to work harder to figure things out.

Showing is one of the most sophisticated techniques a writer can use. It makes your writing richer and more descriptive. It also helps you discover new ways to say things. Showing is the key to rich and satisfying descriptive writing that sounds like the writing you read in the very best books.

# The Tell-Show Strategy

**Give it a try.** Take any simple sentence from your current piece that mentions something you can describe and write it down on the “Tell” side of the chart. Then, make a picture of that sentence in your mind and write down all the things you see in that picture on the “Show” side.

When I do this, it feels like I’m creating a “mini-story” about a particular thing in my piece. I try to think of all the things I “see” in my mental picture as different characters in a scene. And then I try to bring those characters to life with “showing.”

## TELL

*Just say it very simply*

*(The less you write, the better)*

## SHOW

*Describe it in detail*

*(Make a picture in the reader’s mind)*

# Example

## TELL

My basketball game had a strange and exciting ending.

## SHOW

It all came down to the final few seconds. We were behind by one point, 57-56. Our coach had just called time out to set up a play. We were going to go for one shot. My friend Robert was supposed to take it. (He's our best outside shooter.) But something went wrong. I was throwing the ball in but when I looked for Robert, I saw that he had been blocked out by two players on the other team. For a split second I froze, not knowing what to do. Then I realized that if I didn't throw it in quickly, the ref would blow his whistle and the other team would take possession. So I just chucked it as hard as I could toward the basket. Close to the hoop, everyone's arms reached up for the ball. No one could get hold of it as it bounced from player to player. Then, a miracle happened: the ball hit one of their players in the head and bounced right in the hoop as the buzzer went off.

# Another Way to Tell and Show

**Making it easier.** Sometimes it's hard for me to write the "showing" part because I can't actually "see" it myself. When this happens, I make a list of everything I want to show before I actually write out the sentences. What I do is think about the "tell" part, close my eyes, make a picture of what I see, and then make a list on the "show" side. I use this list to write it all up.

## TELL

The lake looked really nice that morning.

## VISUALIZE & LIST

- Water smooth and clear
- Mist rising up
- Fish jumping
- Sun coming up
- Our boat
- A group of ducks
- It was cold

## SHOW

The water was as smooth as glass and clear enough that we could see almost all the way to the bottom. Thin wisps of mist rose up all around us as our boat glided slowly along. Occasionally, a fish would jump but we'd never actually see it. We'd turn our heads at the sound of the splash just in time to see the circles of little waves expanding outward where the fish had come down. Closer to shore, a group of ducks cut a v-shape in the quiet water as they swam along. It was cold but the sun was coming up and I knew that in a few minutes it would start to get warm.

# Tips on Using Tell-Show

**“Showing” by any other name would work as well.** Your teachers will often ask you to describe something, or to write descriptively, or to do a piece of descriptive writing. All of these things are the same as “showing” and they’re all good things to do.

**Tell-Show is similar to Idea-Details but not exactly the same.** The difference between Idea-Details and Tell-Show is subtle but important. In both strategies, you list an idea on the left side and some details on the right. But in Tell-Show we’re only looking for certain kinds of details: the kind that help the reader make a mental picture of your idea. These are mostly visual details, things you could really see if you were there.

**“Showing” has a different “sound” and a different “feeling” when you read it.** The best way to learn about “showing” is to look for it in the books you read. Or, rather, to listen for it. Passages of rich descriptive “showing” detail always sound a little different than the rest of the writing. To me, the sound is smoother, more flowing, more musical. In addition, I often find that sentences and paragraphs get longer when an author is “showing.” I think this gives it a special feeling, too. Try to pay attention to these changes in your own writing and in the writing you read. Look for “showing” and when you find it, study it.

**Save the “Showing” for what’s most important.** “Showing” catches a reader’s attention. Think about it: you’re talking about one little thing in a story but you’re describing it with sentence after sentence. It’s as if you’re making your reader focus on one thing for a longer time than they would normally. This is great but you can’t overdo it. Save the “showing” for the most important parts of your piece: the most important people, places, events, objects, feelings, etc.

**“Showing” slows down the pace.** Because you’re spending so much time describing one thing in your piece, “showing” makes your readers feel like they’re slowing down. This is great if you slow them down to show them something important. But you can’t do it all the time. Otherwise, your piece gets too slow and it becomes tedious to read it.

**“Showing” often requires specific language and special techniques.** When you “show,” you’re using more words to talk about something than you normally need. To accomplish this, writers make their language more specific. They also use some special writing techniques. You could tell you readers that “It was hot.” Or you could show them with something like this: “The scorching sun was as hot as a flame crackling in a fireplace.” The adjective “scorching” is very specific. This isn’t any old sunny day we’re talking about here. And the words “as hot as” introduce a technique called a *simile* where the writer compares one thing to another to increase the reader’s understanding.