

What If?

WRITING TECHNIQUES

Writing in Pictures using the 'Show, Don't Tell' Rule



'Show, don't tell' is an important rule when it comes to writing your story.

What the heck does that mean, you ask? It means you have to paint a picture when you're writing, not simply tell a story. You want your reader to see your story because, as we all know, a picture is worth a thousand words.

Suppose your new girlfriend hints that she'd love to go on a picnic. A friend of yours has taken his girlfriend on picnics before and tells you about the perfect spot. It's quiet, secluded, and picturesque, he says, then hands you the directions.

What do you really know about this spot? You know your friend liked it and you know how to get there. But suppose your friend took his recommendation a step further...

"It's a perfect spot hidden in the forest right on the river. After you park the car, you take a peaceful walk through the cedars. Follow the winding path for ten minutes, and the noise from the road disappears. No cars or people, just the sound of wind whispering in the trees, and birds singing.

"When you reach the river, the forest opens to a grassy glade on the bank of the river. There's a smooth, white limestone, warmed by the sun, that's perfect to spread your blanket. You can enjoy your picnic in the peace of nature watching the sun sparkle on the water, breathing in the aroma of the cedars, and listening to the gurgling river and the singing birds. She'll love it."

It took a little longer to get there but wasn't it worth it?

There are many different ways to incorporate the show, don't tell rule into your writing, let's check some out.

Dialogue

How many books have you read in which the author drones on and on in long narrative passages? Probably not too many, for two reasons: There aren't that many that make it into print, plus, you'd probably get bored and put it down anyway.

A good story needs conversation between the characters. People love to listen in to a lively conversation and a story allows them to do so, particularly when the author uses the show, don't tell rule. Take a look.

Telling...

The next day Jason and Kyla made up after their big fight.

While this statement is certainly short and to the point, it is also very ho-hum.

Showing...

"Hi, Kyla," said Jason. He stopped short of Kyla's locker and looked at his shoes.

"Hi, Jason," Kyla replied, staring straight ahead into the depths of her locker.

"I just wanted to see if you were still talking to me."

"I can't think of any reason to." Kyla shifted a few things around inside her locker, still avoiding Jason's gaze.

"Look, Kyla, I said some things I didn't mean last night. I saw you dancing with Todd and I kind of freaked."

"So I can't dance with anyone but you? Sorry, Jason, but that doesn't work for me."

"No, it's not that." Jason moved to Kyla's side and put his hand on her shoulder. She turned to face him. "It's just that I really like you and I guess I got a little jealous. It won't happen again, I promise."

"I really like you too, Jason," Kyla said, looking up into his eyes. "I guess I was dancing pretty close, but when I saw you leaning against the wall, three inches away from Ashley, it ticked me off."

"Ashley Jordan? You don't have to worry about her. We were talking about a French test."

"You don't have to worry about Todd either. I was using him to get even with you."

"Friends?" Jason grinned and extended his hand.

Kyla brushed aside his hand and pulled him into a hug. "Friends," she whispered in his ear.

Not only do you know they make up now, but you can picture it and you also know a little bit more about Jason and Kyla.

Action

Every good story needs action to keep things moving. Action doesn't necessarily mean sword fights and car chases. Actually they would be out of place in most stories. Action is what happens in the story to move it along. Here's an example of telling as opposed to showing when it comes to action.

Telling...

Sarah regretted coming to the party. Things were getting out of control and she was scared.

You get the point and understand the situation but do you see the scene and feel Sarah's feelings? How's this?

Showing...

Sarah dodged out of the way as Alex Johnson staggered by her towards the stairs. She'd come up to the second floor to find the bathroom and maybe a little quiet. The throbbing bass of the music vibrated under her feet. She worked her way towards the light at the end of the hall, assuming it was the bathroom.

The door was ajar so she pushed it open. Sarah's heart leapt into her throat. Sprawled on the floor, leaning over the toilet, was a complete stranger.

He raised his head when the door opened and waved a half-empty beer bottle. "Wanna have a drink with me?"

Sarah slammed the door and backed away. She bumped into someone coming down the hall towards the bathroom. It was Jeremy Smith, the jerk she sat beside in math. His hands wandered over her body and he tried to pull her into one of the bedrooms.

Summoning all her strength, Sarah yanked away from Jeremy and ran headlong for the stairs. Racing to the front door, she burst outside into the pouring rain. She had to get out of there before something awful happened.

In this version you know Sarah is at a party that is getting out of control, and you know she is scared. No one specifically told you that, but the picture that was painted for you leaves no doubt.

Now that you know the concept of showing your readers your story instead of telling them, there's a final point to consider. When you think of showing something to someone, you think about the sense of sight. When you're writing a story, however, you should be using all five senses; taste, touch, sight, smell, and sound.

Writing isn't limited to visualization. A good story will show the reader how things sound and feel; a good writer will draw his or her reader into the scene with sounds and tastes. Read on...

Allison breathed a sigh of relief as she settled into the comfort of her bed. When she'd taken on the snow-shoveling job she hadn't expected it to snow every day for a week. She'd just spent another two hours in the biting cold, heaving snow onto banks that were already three feet high.

Her mom had made her a steaming mug of hot chocolate and she raised it to her mouth. The steam wafted over her face, fogging her glasses and warming her bright pink cheeks. She breathed in the rich chocolate, tantalizing her taste buds and warming her insides.

She'd put on her favourite CD and the singing stirred her heart. She closed her eyes and listened as the singer's voice rose and fell. The gentle chords of the guitar and the beat of the drum pulsed through her body. The tension that had seized her neck and shoulders slowly began to dissolve.

She set aside her hot chocolate and picked up the warm bowl of chili that sat on her night table. The tomato sauce was thick and tangy. She wasn't a big fan of spicy foods but today she savoured the heat from the chili powder and cayenne pepper as it spread from her mouth and stomach out through her body.

Allison finished up her chili and lay back on her bed, pulling her thick pink comforter up under her chin. Her fuzzy, Miss Piggy slippers were finally having their effect, making her half-frozen toes tingle with newfound warmth.

A movement in her window caught her eye and she turned to see huge, fluffy snowflakes drifting gently from thick, black clouds. She groaned and rolled over, pulling her blanket tighter. She used to love those big, beautiful white flakes but right now the sight of them made her back sore.

Did your taste buds water? Could you feel the warmth spreading through Allison's body as pulled up her blankets? As you can see, pictures can be painted with more than just sight when you are writing a story.

How can you be sure you're touching on all the senses in your story? After you've written your first draft, take five different coloured markers and go back through your story highlighting the senses. Use one colour for each sense and when you're done you should have a rainbow on the page. If you're missing or weak on one or two colours then you have something to work on in your next draft.

There you have it...the ultimate rule of the effective writer; show, don't tell. If you keep it in mind every time you sit down to write, your writing will come off in pictures and that will mean a better story and better marks on any project.