**Show, Don’t Tell**

*Learn what “show, don’t tell” means and get tips on how to create images for your readers.*

**By Mignon Fogarty,**

[**Grammar Girl**](http://www.quickanddirtytips.com/grammar-girl)

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Today we’re going to learn about the old writing adage “Show, don’t tell.”

Brenda is a teacher in Fort Lauderdale, Florida, and she asked me to help her students understand why they should try to show their readers images rather than just tell them facts. She says, “A problem shared by novice writers is the inability to provide specific detail. LSD, [lacking specific detail is an acronym made up by an English teacher friend of mine. Frequently students will have papers covered with the comment ‘LSD’ because their writing is general and vague.”

I confirmed with Brenda that what she is trying to convey to her students is the old writing adage “show, don’t tell.”

**Acronym**: an abbreviation formed from the initial letters of other words and pronounced as a word (e.g. ASCII, NASA)

**Adage:** a proverb or short statement expressing a general truth.

**What Does “Show, Don’t Tell” Mean?**

Good writing tends to draw an image in the reader’s mind instead of just telling the reader what to think or believe.

Here’s a sentence that tells:

*Mr. Bobweave was a fat, ungrateful old man.*

That gets the information across, but it’s boring. It simply tells the reader the basics about Mr. Bobweave.

Here’s a way to create an image of Mr. Bobweave in the reader’s mind:

*Mr. Bobweave heaved himself out of the chair. As his feet spread under his apple-like frame and his arthritic knees popped and cracked in objection, he pounded the floor with his cane while cursing that dreadful girl who was late again with his coffee.*

In the second example, I didn’t tell you Mr. Bobweave is fat. I showed it by writing that his feet spread and describing his apple-like frame. I didn’t tell you Mr. Bobweave is old. I showed it by mentioning his arthritic knees, his cane, and that he has a girl who tends to him. I didn’t tell you he is ungrateful, but with the impatience of a pounding cane and his disdain for his caregiver, I got you thinking that he may not be a very nice man.

**Can You Ever “Tell, not Show”?**

You may have noticed that it takes many more words to show rather than tell. A story that is filled with such detailed descriptions could become tiresome, so just as you [**mix long sentences with short sentences**](http://grammar.quickanddirtytips.com/how-to-write-clear-sentences.aspx) to create variety and keep your readers interested, it’s often wise to mix sections that show with sections that tell to keep your story moving.

**Use Metaphors and Similes to Show Your Ideas**

It’s often wise to mix sections that show with sections that tell.

Most of the descriptions I used in the last example were literal, but [**metaphors and similes**](http://www.google.com/url?q=http%3A%2F%2Fgrammar.quickanddirtytips.com%2Fgrammar-similes-metaphors.aspx&sa=D&sntz=1&usg=AFQjCNGLYYp0EBiPEDaV-kTug9hyZux-Fw) also provide an interesting way to create an image for the reader. For example, if you want to say someone is huge and slow, you could use a simile about an elephant. You could say he saunters like an elephant, methodically forcing his path to a crowded watering hole.

If your protagonist is stealthy, you could use a simile about a falling leaf: She landed under the window like a leaf that had fallen from a tree.

**Literal:** taking words in their usual or most basic sense without metaphor or exaggeration.

**Protagonist:** the leading character or one of the major characters in a play, film, novel, etc.

**Should You “Show, Don’t Tell” in Nonfiction?**

The “show, don’t tell” rule applies most strongly to fiction. You’re telling a story, setting a scene, perhaps even creating a world. You want your readers to use their imagination and bring those characters and scenes to life, and that’s easier for them to do if you’ve started painting the picture.

Nonfiction is harder to pin down. Sometimes it will be appropriate to create an image for your readers, and other times stating the facts is the most effective way to make your point.

Narrative nonfiction is a work in which the writer tells a story, much like a novel, but it’s a true story. For example, the book *Marley and Me*is about a man and his dog, and it’s a true story that reads like a novel. It was even made into a movie. In the same way you can make your fiction writing better by including little details that help the readers see the scene, you can also make a narrative nonfiction story better.

On the other hand, if you’re writing a technical document such as a scientific paper or user manual, it’s usually better to stick to the facts. There isn’t a lot of room for flourish when you just want people to push the red button on the front of the device or insert camlock D into hole A.

Of course there are middle grounds. Sometimes an essay, op-ed piece, or newsletter will benefit from creative writing and sometimes it won’t. You have to use your own judgement.

**Show the Reader Your Imagination With Your Writing**

If you find your writing feeling flat, particularly fiction or narrative nonfiction writing, step back and imagine your scene yourself. What sounds do you hear? What smells are in the air? What expression does your character have on his face? What are his motivations? Once you are deeper in your own imagination, see if you can make your writing better by adding a few specifics and transporting the readers to the scene you have in your mind.

**Task:**

Brainstorm 6 ‘showing’ details for the following statements. Then turn those details into 2-3 ‘showing sentences.

1. Harry’s bedroom was messy.
2. The cafeteria was chaotic.