

Show, Don't Tell

The Craft of Writing · By Simon Townsend · 2 min read

Show don't tell

You may be having some trouble in your writing, using inadequate "telling" rather than powerful "showing".

Here I pass on the words of a great teacher of writing Judy Delton. This is adapted with permission from her book (now out of print sadly) called 29 Common Writing Mistakes.

It is important to apply the principle of "show don't tell" to create good writing.

SHOW DON'T TELL - Judy Delton's valuable advice

Do you remember reading an article and then you came to a long passage of description and you felt a bit bored? Your eye (you found) was slipping down the page, just grazing the words, moving along, skipping words, skipping whole sentences, searching for something. What was your eye searching for? It was looking for something to happen. It was looking for action!

Most long narrative in articles in mainstream publications, is boring. What is narrative? Narrative is telling a story, instead of showing a story, endless paragraphs where nothing happens but description. Mary said she was going to the circus is a narrative phrase, a telling phrase. Mary said, "I am going to the circus!" is an action phrase.

Don't fall into the mistake of telling too much. Try to show everything that happens. There are four ways to do that.

1. Quotes
2. Examples of what you're telling
3. Happenings (incidents)
4. Anecdotes (stories about happenings)

Quotes are the best way to break up long narrative. When individuals can say something themselves, let them say it rather than you the journalist. If you interview people for an article, don't tell what they said, but let them say it themselves. Use quotes when you have a chance. Put the words into their mouths. When a reader sees quotation marks, he is enlivened. He may not even realise it, but he is. He reads on. And a writer needs every device he can find to keep that reader reading. Look over your articles. See how many quotation marks you used.

Incidents (happenings) is another good way to break up long narrative. An incident is having something happen. Movies and plays and television sitcoms are based on this. It would be no good watching a movie unless something happened. And it's no good reading if something doesn't happen - an earthquake, a walk around the block, a car chase, a cooking class, an explosion, sibling rivalry, a party. Dialogue is good, but people can't talk the whole time. Something has to happen.

Speakers (and writers) who hold your attention use anecdotes. They say "I met a man on the way to the studio . . ." An anecdote is the telling of a story within a story. The Bible uses this device in the parables. So follow the example of what is said by some to be the world's greatest book, and tell an anecdote to break up the narrative.

Your job is to move the words along in that article rapidly and fluently and with lots of incident, anecdote, and dialogue. In my writing classes I have the students print in their notebooks in very large letters, **SHOW DON'T TELL . . . SHOW DON'T TELL . . . SHOW DON'T TELL**. Three times for emphasis.

- Judy Delton

Reprinted from *The Wonderful World of Journalism*. Written in the spirit of Simon Townsend's journalism craft advice. Visit simontownsendjournalist.com for the full archive.