

Imagination

A story can't be told without a fertile imagination. The imagination provides the fuel for our expression. It usually fires us up when we are not looking for it. Whether lying on a couch, working on the job, sitting on the toilet, going for a walk or having a shower. Never underestimate these cloudbursts of vision because they help seed the potential of a gripping story. Sometimes it is very handy to carry around a notebook to capture the idea before it disappears into the ether. Also leave a pad and a pen by your bed. Sometimes great ideas can be inspired by a dream. Give yourself some quality time by doing nothing. When one stops thinking and just lets the mind wander off in the world of fantasy the spark of an idea will suddenly and magically appear.

I am certain of nothing but the hearts affections and the truth of the imagination. - [John Keats]

Imagination is more important than knowledge. - [Albert Einstein]

Don't think - [Natalie Goldberg]

PRACTICAL

Task: Write for sixty seconds without stopping. Just write exactly what comes into your head. Don't write in proper sentences or proper punctuation unless it comes out that way.

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Entertain first educate second

A good book be it fiction or non-fiction should first and foremost be entertaining. A hard slog should only be relegated to textbooks and reading an instruction manual on how to build a rocket ship. This does not mean that the writer cannot challenge the reader. Indeed if one entertains the reader first his or her attention will be rewarded with the deeper meanings of the story.

When talented people write well, it is generally for this reason: they're moved by a desire to

touch the audience. - [Robert McKee]

How to find the deeper meanings while being entertaining

The meaning of your story can be simply conveyed by your feelings and passion for telling it. Words for words sake do not make for great storytelling. One should never let cleverness negate the story you wish to tell. Being in touch with the true core of you're being and you're own sense of wonder should be most paramount.

People ask: What if I unblock myself and I have nothing to say? The more pertinent question is what if I live my life without giving myself the opportunity to express what I need to say? -
[Julia Cameron]

Feelings and words

The feelings you have for your story are truly what drive your desire for expression. Words are the tools a writer uses to convey these feelings whether he or she is writing a crime thriller, a comedy or an autobiography. Words are not the end but the means in which a writer can aptly express him or herself.

Only the emotion endures - [Ezra Pound]

To make you hear, to make you feel...to make you see. That—and no more, it is everything. -
[Joseph Conrad]

Inner and outer reality

The writer should not only describe what is happening with the setting, place and the action that occurs within it but also the inner world of its characters. Without knowing their feelings and motivations, the reader will fail to be moved or inspired to turn the next page.

How do I know what I think until I see what I say - [E.M. Forster]

Showing versus telling

Here is an example of telling.

Telling : "I was really surprised."

Showing: "Oh my God I never expected something like this!"

Telling : "I was really pissed off."

Showing: "Go fuck yourself."

Telling : "I was incredibly happy."

Showing: "I'm king of the world!"

There are times in a novel when *telling* is the right thing to do. It's when you need to summarize an event because to create a scene for it would be the wrong thing to do in terms of pace, tension, etc. A common example is when you've shown an event in an earlier scene and then come to a place where your character needs to pass along what happened. Rather than drag your reader through the whole thing, blow by blow, you just write something such as:

April told May how June had told Julie where to shove her opinion.

That's a necessary and effective use of *telling*.

There are other times when it's the best thing to do. For example, when what needs to happen is so mundane that to waste words on it is to waste words. Imagine a character is talking on his cell phone. When he finishes with the conversation, you could have shown this:

Jake pressed the little blue phone on his cell-phone keypad to end the call.

Truly, that isn't needed at all, and smacks of overwriting.

Write instead: Jake ended the call.

The reader can easily imagine ending a call with a cell phone if they've ever used one, and even if they haven't used one, they've seen it on television.

So what's so bad about *telling* in a novel? You "tell" a story, right? Not really. In a novel you *dramatize*. You need to craft words that create an effect in the reader's mind. You can only do that through *showing*.

The effect your readers want is for what they read to trigger in them the sights and sounds and smells of what's happening in the story. They don't want approximations, they don't want a report, they want to *experience* the story's *reality*.

You spot *telling* by looking for simple declarative sentences that tell the reader something. The verb "was" is often a signpost of a *telling* statement.

Showing is using behaviour (action, speech, thoughts) to illustrate or dramatize what the character is feeling/doing.

Here are some looks at *telling* versus *showing* that come from actual samples.

The scene: Anna is beat from a long, bad day at work, and she's spent hours at the hospital with her father, who has been unconscious for days. You want to give the reader Anna's physical and emotional condition.

Telling : Anna was physically and mentally exhausted.

Sure, you get information. You have an intellectual understanding of her condition. But you have no *feeling* for what Anna feels like, do you? To show that Anna is physically and mentally exhausted, you could do something like this:

Showing: All Anna wanted to do was crawl into bed and go to sleep. But first she would cry. She didn't think she could be calm and composed for another minute.

The scene continues: Anna's father suddenly wakes and thrashes around wildly, gasping, making monitors go wild. You want to give the reader Anna's reaction.

Telling: Anna was frightened.

Showing: Oh, God, what was happening? "Dad?" Why didn't he respond? "Nurse, do something!"

As you go through your manuscript, whenever you come across a "was-type" declarative sentence that simply delivers information rather than shows behavior, you probably have an instance of *telling*.

Your task then is to visualize the character in that state or situation. See the movie. As the author, you can also "hear" thoughts. Then *show* the reader the thinking or speaking or movement that illustrates what the reader needs to know.

Example - dealing with the use of adverbs.

Telling: He was furious when he stabbed the man.

OR

Telling: He stabbed the man furiously.

Task: Write a Showing sentence.

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SHOW BY USING METAPHOR

In the film 'Love Story' the lead character Oliver is playing squash and whipping his opponent. Everything is going right for him. He has just married the love of his life and has just been hired for a lucrative job.

Fast forward. His wife is diagnosed with a terminal disease and the firm he works for has to let him go. The same opponent he played before now defeats him easily.

In the film 'Kramer V Kramer' the lead character Ted Kramer is a workaholic who comes home late to find that his wife has decided to leave him and their only son. The next morning he has to make French toast for his little boy for the first time and totally botches it.

Fast forward. After many months of being a single parent his wife wins custody of their child. Before she comes to pick him up Ted and his son are shown in silence skilfully preparing French toast. This simple scene signifies the positive growth and bond that has developed between father and son without saying a word.

TASK: Write an example of a showing metaphor in your book.

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Fast Forward

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Dialogue

Dialogue should only be used as a way to define how a character talks and acts and a way to help move the story forward. Good dialogue should be punchy and direct.

In the movie *Escape From Alcatraz*, a prison psychologist inquires of the protagonist, portrayed by Clint Eastwood, “What was your childhood like?”

Eastwood replies, “Short.”

With a single word he sums up Eastwood's hard-knocks, deprived upbringing and loveless disadvantaged roots. It speaks of the crazy cockeyed world he lived in, the grim and gritty neighbourhood where mean kids would beat him up daily, the cynical teachers who humiliated and abused him, his wicked dope stealing stepmother, his absent father, his cute fluffy and floppy-eared little puppy who got run over.

Of every bit of dialogue the writer must ask himself, does this line move the tale forward? Does it tell us something new about the characters? Even if it does, is there a faster, fresher way, more efficient, more economical way to accomplish the purpose - *short is sweet*.

Example

“Well I think I should come.” - change to - “I’m coming.”

“You know I really like you.” - change to - “I really like you.”

HE SAID/ SHE SAID/ I SAID

How to signify who is talking to who.

She looked into his eyes and said, “I love you.”

“I know,” he replied.

“Who the hell do you think you are? God?” she said.

“I have to model myself on someone,” I replied.

Dialogue with a little description.

“Are you lost?” she asked.

“Not now I've found you,” he said, planting a kiss on her lips.

Another variation is to signify ownership half way through dialogue.

“I want you so much,” he pleaded.

“Too bad for you,” she said. “I want you less.”

Task: Write some dialogue between two characters that involves an altercation.

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