

# Showing vs. Telling

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Some of these ideas and examples are borrowed from the Reedsy Blog (<https://blog.reedsy.com/show-dont-tell>) and from the Reedsy course on this topic (<https://blog.reedsy.com/learning/courses/writing/show-dont-tell>).

*“Don’t tell me the moon is shining. Show me the glint of light on broken glass.”* - Anton Chekhov

The above is a terrific summary, but it is a common misquote. Here is Chekov’s actual words to his brother, who wanted to be a writer:

*“In descriptions of Nature one must seize on small details, grouping them so that when the reader closes his eyes he gets a picture. For instance, you’ll have a moonlit night if you write that on the mill dam a piece of glass from a broken bottle glittered like a bright little star, and that the black shadow of a dog or a wolf rolled past like a ball.”*

We’ve all heard the often-repeated writing advice: *Show, don’t tell*. But what exactly does it mean?

**Showing:** When you convey stories and characters with actions, thoughts, words, and sensory details.

**Telling:** When you convey stories and characters with objective, factual exposition.

Following this advice turns your story into an *immersive experience*—more *sensory*, more *emotional*.

## Tips for SDT (Show, Don’t Tell)

### *Use SDT to Develop your Characters*

Showing is a great way to **develop your characters**—much more effective than describing their traits.

Example from *Across Horizons 1: Obsolete Theorem*:

**Telling:** Skyra was resourceful, and she knew how to live off the land.

**Showing** (through action):

Quietly singing to herself, she gripped the soft, spineless belly skin and began working it from the flesh, rolling the skin over itself to cover the painful spines. Her birthmother had taught her how to skin a hedgehog, which now seemed so long ago.

Disregarding the risk of being heard, Skyra pounded the skinned body with a rock, pulverizing the bones and flesh into a paste. She scooped the paste up with her fingers and consumed it quickly. By the time the mashed body was gone, she felt full enough to leave behind the intestines.

**Dialogue** is SDT and is a great way to develop characters. Dialogue can be used to define the *relationships* and *motivations* of your characters.

Example from *Fused: Training Day*:

**Telling:** Addison had a monstrous appearance but the mind of a child.

**Showing** (through action and dialogue):

The man swiveled, turning the gun on Addison. “What the hell is that?”

Addison remained in place, but the muscles in his arms and torso visibly tensed. Bobby was used to seeing Addison’s new form—Addison had been this way for over a year—but strangers were usually terrified of him... As usual, Addison was now naked—he hated wearing clothes.

“I said, what is that!”

Addison raised one of his arms and pointed a long finger. “That man is not nice. Why is he here?”

“¡Chuta!” the man exclaimed. “That thing can talk?”

The younger guy said, “I don’t like this, Tavo. Let’s go.”

“I told you to shut your mouth!”

“He’s part of our family,” Ashley said. “You bastards better not hurt him.”

Example from *Six of Crows* by Leigh Bardugo (notice how the dialogue tells us much about these characters):

“Let’s say the mark is a tourist walking through the Barrel. He’s heard it’s a good place to get rolled, so he keeps patting his wallet, making sure it’s there, congratulating himself on just how alert and cautious he’s being. Of course every time he pats his back pocket or the front of his coat, what is he doing? He’s telling every thief on the Stave exactly where he keeps his scrub.”

“Saints,” grumbled Nina. “I’ve probably done that.”

“Everyone does,” said Inej.

Jesper lifted a brow. “Not everyone.”

“That’s only because you never have anything in your wallet,” Nina shot back.

“Mean.”

“Factual.”

“Facts are for the unimaginative,” Jesper said with a dismissive wave.

## ***Use SDT to Create a Sense of Atmosphere and Setting***

Setting is one of the most important elements of a story, and creating your setting is a great way to use SDT.

**Telling:** The Sittie River was dark, muddy, and foreboding.

**Showing** (through action and sensory details):

Bobby liked the way his bare knees touched the soft mud with each gentle kick of his fins. The water was warm, and he was starting to feel comforted by the close muddiness of it, as if nothing existed beyond the range of his vision.

A dark shape loomed before his mask, and he thrust his hand out to grab the tree root before hitting it, surprised that he was already at the river’s west bank. He drew up closer, staring into the cavity between the tangle of roots and the mud of the sloped bank. Something was there, just at the edge of what he could see. It was about the size and shape of a large coin, and it glinted with a golden hue. Bobby pushed forward, forcing his facemask between some of the roots to get a closer look.

Example from *Dreadnought* by April Daniels:

**Telling:** I don't like going into the discount shoe store downtown.

**Showing** (through a character's emotions):

Mom takes me to the discount shoe store downtown, one of those places with the neon-orange carpet and the salespeople who are a little too friendly to feel safe around. The door gives an electric chime as we enter the shop, which summons them like sharks to bloody water.

Example from *Across Horizons 3: Hostile Emergence*:

**Telling:** Lincoln was amazed at how immersive the virtual world felt.

**Showing** (through sensory details and dialogue):

Lincoln could smell the moist soil and humidity of his new creation. He could hear the breeze riffing through the leaves at the top of the canopy. He strode up to the nearest clump of trees and scooped up a handful of leaf litter from the forest floor. He put it near his face and breathed in the fresh scent of soil. "How could they possibly do this?" he asked. "Even creating a static simulation this detailed presents coding challenges that boggle the mind, but this... this place is fully-interactive and modifiable, and it stimulates all the senses. I've never dreamed such an environment was possible."

Maddy's rich, crystal-clear voice came from behind him. "Are you now considering staying here forever?"

"It's not real, remember?"

"If you say so."

### ***Use Body Language to SDT***

The body doesn't lie. Body language can be used to *show* emotions, instead of *telling* what emotions your characters are experiencing.

**Telling:** Lincoln was annoyed.

**Showing:** Lincoln suppressed the urge to roll his eyes.

**Telling:** "I wish I had the money sitting somewhere and could write you all a check," Leo said, hoping his family trusted him.

**Showing:** "I wish I had the money sitting somewhere and could write you all a check," Leo said. He placed his palms flat on the table and leaned forward, looking each one of them in the eye.

For body language ideas, check out these body language *Cheat Sheets*:

<https://www.writerswrite.co.za/cheat-sheets-for-writing-body-language>

***IMPORTANT!*** – Avoid the common mistake of showing *and then* telling!

*Example:* Skyra growled in frustration.

*Example:* His eyes widened in shock.

*Example:* "Give it back to me," he said angrily.

However, sometimes it's good to do both. The following is from *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay* by Michael Chabon. Can you see why it's okay here to write "Sammy was sick with envy"?

"Can you tell me what you were doing in California" said Sammy. "Or is that confidential information too?"

"I was crossing over from Japan."

"Japan!" Sammy was sick with envy. He had never gone farther on his soda-straw legs than Buffalo, never undertaken a crossing more treacherous than that of the flatulent poison-green ribbon that separated Brooklyn from Manhattan.

### ***Use Actions to SDT***

Action is not just fights and car chases. Actions are any character movements, including dialogue. An action could be as mundane as wiping a tear away, or turning to squint at the sun. Actions reveal character traits, and they move the story forward.

Example from *No One Can Pronounce My Name* by Rakesh Satyal:

**Telling:** Harit was clumsy, concerned with what other people thought of him, perhaps a bit of a dreamer.

**Showing** (through action):

Harit descended the rubber-coated stairs of the bus and tripped as he jumped to the sidewalk below. He turned around to see if anyone had noticed, but the bus was already pulling away, leaving a dispersing cloud of smoke and people.

Example from *Across Horizons 3: Hostile Emergence*:

**Telling:** Skyra knew this place wasn't real, but she was comforted by the strange presence of her dead sister, and she liked being here.

**Showing** (through actions):

Before leaving the meadow they scanned their surroundings for any signs of predators or bolup hunting parties. Skyra didn't know if it were even possible she could be harmed in this place, but she wasn't going to take chances. She and Veenah descended the slope from the meadow to the narrow stream that flowed between the hills on its way to the Yagua river.

The stream was small enough to leap across, but the water was cool, and it flowed clean over a bed of rocks worn smooth by the current. The two sisters removed their capes, waist-skins, and footwraps and sat in the ankle-deep water to bathe. They laughed and threw cold water at each other. Skyra lay on her back in the stream to wet her hair. Veenah sat behind her, squeezing the excess water from Skyra's hair, then re-wetting it, then squeezing again.

### **When is it a good idea to *Tell* instead of *Show*?**

You cannot show everything. Your story would be far too long. It would also be boring because you would be showing insignificant events in unnecessary detail. Some details simply need to be described quickly, so you can move on with your story.

*When you are moving forward through time to another scene, quickly describe events that have passed:*

Less than a half hour later, after ironing out preliminary details, the three National Science Board paper shufflers finally walked out of the room and exited Lincoln's facility.

After only a few seconds of much-needed silence, the door burst open. In came Lincoln's personal assistant Derek Dagger, followed by a half dozen scientists and techs.

*Or you could be more subtle about it:*

It was noon in Denver and Lena was late for pilates again.

*Some details are not significant enough to show in detail, so just describe them quickly:*

Kevin had lost his keys a few days ago and hadn't replaced them, so now he was going to have to walk.

*A good rule of thumb:*

If describing something in great sensory detail or with dialogue does not help to move your story forward, just **tell** it (briefly) instead of **showing** it.

To bring this to an end, let's look at J.R.R Tolkien establishes his scene and atmosphere (or Mordor) in *The Two Towers*:

The gasping pools were choked with ash and crawling muds, sickly white and grey, as if the mountains had vomited the filth of their entrails upon the lands about. High mounds of crushed and powdered rock, great cones of earth fire-blasted and poison-stained, stood like an obscene graveyard in endless rows, slowly revealed in the reluctant light.

*What do you think? Does it help you visualize the place? Some people might think it is over the top. Do you agree?*