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learning

How to Master the
'Show, Don't Tell' Rule

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Reedsy Learning:

How to Master the 'Show, Don't Tell' Rule

Contents

Introduction

You've probably heard this classic piece of writing advice a thousand times. But what does *Show, Don't Tell* actually mean?

From building immersive worlds to creating compelling characters, the *Show, Don't Tell* rule is a powerful tool that should be in every author's kit — but it's also one that should be handled carefully. While you signed up for the free 10-day course, we hope you'll benefit from having this handy digital book at your fingertips*. Understanding *show, don't tell* will not only improve your writing, but will strengthen the reader's experience of your book. And with this book, you'll have all the guidance you need to fine-tune your prose.

So what's covered in this book?

All the great lessons from the *Show, Don't Tell* course are here. You'll learn how to:

- Develop your characters organically
- Create atmosphere and setting
- Write efficient prose and learn how to incorporate "showing" into your writing
- Improve your ability to tell a story
- Learn when not to follow this rule (as with any writing advice, there is a fine balance)

So without further ado, let us show you the basics...

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It's true!

The Reedsy Book Editor, is our pride and joy here at Reedsy. It's a fantastic writing app (whether you're plotting or writing), a reliable editing platform, and more than that, you can use it to typeset and format your books for digital publication.. Bounce it out in ePub or Mobi; the choice is yours.

You can read more about it at the end!

What is 'Show, don't Tell'?

In the history of well-intentioned writing aphorisms, the only piece of advice that gets used more than "write what you know" and "kill your darlings" might be the ever-popular "show, don't tell."

What is show, don't tell?

Show, don't tell is an approach to writing in which stories and characters are conveyed via actions, thoughts, words, and sensory details — instead of cold, factual exposition.

While the true origin is disputed (some point to Percy Lubbock's 1921 book, *The Craft of Fiction*), popular culture has attributed it to Russian writer Anton Chekhov and his (commonly misquoted) line:

> *Don't tell me the moon is shining. Show me the glint of light on broken glass.*

Chekhov would choose to illustrate a night-time scene by providing readers with sensory details and context clues rather than flat-out statements.

Why is it so popular?

Show, don't tell (or "SDT" as we'll refer to it for brevity's sake) is meant to facilitate an immersive reading experience. Instead of asking readers to process a story on a purely intellectual level, this writing rule intends to pull readers into the narrative, allowing them almost to experience it firsthand.

Storytelling should be a sensory experience. To move forward, you might only need the reader to know that the market square was busy, but readers want more. What does it feel like to be there? The sounds, the smells, how it feels to be jostled about by the crowds.

Many readers also enjoy the minute-by-minute detective work that takes place when they're asked to interpret why the narrator has, for example, chosen to describe a bead of sweat trickling down the forehead of the High Court judge. Is he just hot — or is he nervous? By employing SDT, the author can encourage their reader to engage with the story as an active participant.

And finally, SDT is simply a way of encouraging writers to not lean so heavily on exposition — to activate the readers' senses and tell their story in a more subtle, emotionally engaging way.

Writing exercise

Let's wrap-up this first lesson with two small exercises. The first one will deal with developing characters through showing, as mentioned above:

- Head to Reedsy's blog post about character quirks.
- Scroll down to the 'Personality traits' and 'Strengths and

Weaknesses' sections.

- Pick one item from either list and write a brief scene in which you demonstrate these traits without mentioning the words themselves.

The second exercise involves developing a sense of setting. Think back to Chekhov's "glint of light on the broken glass" adage, and rewrite this line by Edward Bulwer–Lytton — perhaps the most famous example of *telling*:

It was a dark and stormy night; the rain fell in torrents...

The Iceberg Theory

One of the most influential storytelling principles behind SDT is Ernest Hemingway's "Iceberg Theory." What's that, you say?

This theory, also called the theory of omission, posits that the best writing reveals only a few details at a time, effectively keeping the rest "below the surface" — just like how the bulk of an iceberg lies hidden beneath the surface of the ocean.

Hemingway began formulating the Iceberg Theory as a young journalist writing news briefs. Years later, in reference to one of his early short stories, he would write the following:

> *"I omitted the real ending [...] on my new theory that you could omit anything, and the omitted part would strengthen the story."*

This is the Iceberg Theory in a nutshell: giving readers just enough that they can draw their own conclusions about what "lies beneath." As Arielle touched on yesterday, this is much more satisfying than telling them outright.

How to use the Iceberg Theory with SDT

Of course, minimal information does not make for good writing in and of itself. You still have to ensure that information is evocative and intriguing enough to engage readers. That's where SDT comes in!

Here's another example of the Iceberg Theory in action, with a strong description from the opening of Celeste Ng's *Everything I Never Told You*:

> *Lydia is late for breakfast. As always, next to her cereal bowl, her mother has placed a sharpened pencil and Lydia's physics homework, six problems flagged with small ticks. Driving to work, Lydia's father nudges the dial toward WXKP, Northern Ohio's Best News Source, vexed by the crackles of static. On the stairs, Lydia's brother yawns, still twined in the tail end of a dream. And in her chair in the corner of the kitchen, Lydia's sister hunches moon-eyed over her cornflakes, sucking them to pieces one by one.*

There are a few subtle *showing* mechanisms at work here: crackles of static from the radio, the taste of cornflakes. But far more compelling is what the scene implies about the Lee family as a whole — all beginning the morning separately, all described in relation to middle daughter Lydia (who, as readers know, will not be coming to breakfast).

Ng never *explicitly* states that "Lydia kept the family together; without her, they would fall apart." Yet as the novel progresses, it becomes clear that this is the iceberg lurking beneath that

very first passage and many passages to follow.

Tips for applying the Iceberg Theory yourself

On that note, here are a few tips on how to use the Iceberg Theory when SDT'ing:

1. Use it to hint at complex dynamics and histories. The Iceberg Theory works well in the context of relationship dynamics, especially those with a long history. The larger the underwater iceberg, the more weight your descriptions will hold — and the more satisfied readers will be as chunks are revealed.

   2. You can tell a little bit if it serves the showing. Sometimes to dig deep with your showing, you first need to establish context. Ng does it with that first line where she tells us, "Lydia is late for breakfast." Don't be afraid to tell if it balances or enhances your showing!

   3. Don't omit what you don't know yourself. The Iceberg Theory is not an excuse for incomplete character or story development; if you're implying something rather than confirming it, it should be for an intended effect, not mere laziness. As Hemingway puts it: "A writer who omits things because he does not know them only makes hollow places in his writing."

Writing exercises

The Iceberg Theory is tough to apply in isolation — you need a fully fleshed-out character or story, a proper iceberg, in order to deliberately show a fraction of it.

   That said, if you don't have your own story or characters mapped out yet, you can try these exercises with existing

characters (from a book, film, TV show, etc.) that you know incredibly well!

- Write a scene in which a character's behavior or reaction to something is affected by a past experience — without saying what that experience was.
- Write a monologue on a seemingly arbitrary subject that deeply reflects that character's worldview.
- Write a description of someone or something whose appearance, unbeknownst to the reader, used to be completely different.

When in doubt, remember that less is more, and ice is nice.

Chapter 2 Resources

- [What is the Theme of Your Story? \[Iceberg Theory\]](#) (blog)

Establishing Atmosphere and Setting

From desolate alien planets to impossibly-shaped wizard's towers, speculative fiction writers spend a lot of time imagining and describing different settings. But it's not just the fantastical authors who do this, it's all of us.

Creating a compelling location — and using it to build the right atmosphere for your story — goes well beyond genre. No matter what kind of setting your story takes place in, you'll want to capture it with enough nuance that it comes alive in your readers' minds.

When writing atmosphere and setting, it's easy to bring in sensory details. Wind can bite a character's cheeks, or their knuckles can be stiff as they unwrap their ice-crusted hands from the snow shovel they've been using for the past hour. Sweat can run down a character's spine, or the air can ripple and wave above the parking lot.

When creating your setting, go deeper than just *telling* us "it was dark." How does the darkness impact what your characters can see, or where they feel comfortable stepping? How do *you* feel when you're standing in the dark?

Using characters to create atmosphere

It's even better if you can use your characters' feelings to color the setting itself, like April Daniels does in *Dreadnought*:

> *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.*

Notice that nothing about the shop is inherently threatening, but the protagonist's view of what's happening paints a vivid picture.

And remember, not every chapter needs to open with a wall of text telling us where the scene is taking place. The best descriptions are naturally worked into the scene, showing us details of the setting as the character interacts with it. Not only does this prevent description fatigue, it makes the scene active rather than static.

Take this page from Kate Hope Day's debut novel, *If, Then*:

> *Inside her parents' kitchen Samara opens a cabinet full of her mother's too-bright Fiestaware dishes and pulls out a mug the color of pool water. She turns on the electric kettle and stares out the kitchen window at the wet pavement and shifting pine trees. Her parents' new neighbor Cass walks by with her furry black dog, and her oversized raincoat flaps in the wind.*

Nowhere does Day tell us where Samara's parents live, but right away we know that they're in a suburb. Where else can you look out the window and see both trees and a neighbor walking their dog? Even the choice of Fiestaware is telling: a brand popular with the middle class, while the color of pool water brings to mind a backyard in the summertime.

Additionally, we learn that the suburb in question is probably in the Pacific Northwest, judging from the *wet pavement*, and *shifting pine trees.* And speaking of which, did you notice how she established not just the probable location, but the weather with just six words? That's the power of showing.

Writing exercise

The best way to practice showing a particular atmosphere or setting is by forcing yourself to avoid all the obvious words. What do I mean by that?

Pick a location from your work in progress (if you don't have a work in progress, pick the room you're currently in). Let's say it's a coffee shop. For this exercise, write your scene without using the words: coffee shop, barista, table, latte, etc.

So what are you allowed to use? Everything else: the hiss of the machines behind the counter and the soft music overhead, writers buried behind their laptop screens, how the room smells while you wait. How does that smell make your character feel? What memories spring to their mind?

The results of this exercise will be farther into the *show* category than you're likely to use in a real story — like all things, there's a balance to SDT. Still, by forcing yourself to avoid every obvious description, you're teaching your mind to reach beyond your first impulse and dig deeper into the heart of your setting.

And that's a skill you can't just be told.

Chapter 3 Resources

- [Setting of a Story: What Is It? And How to Write It](#) (blog)

Writing Character-Revealing Dialogue

Now, it might sound ironic in a course about show, *don't tell* (SDT) — but as it turns out, you can *show* just as well with dialogue as you can with sensory description.

What does it mean to show with dialogue?

While some authors exploit dialogue for info–dumping, skill–fully written dialogue reveals things in a much more subtle, engaging manner. Here's a line of dialogue that merely *tells*:

> *"There's a pothole right in front of your house, Casey."*

Whereas this line shows the situation evocatively:

> *"Jesus, Casey, you need to get that thing fixed. I nearly blow out a tire every time I pull up your driveway."*

Rather than simply relating bland facts, dialogue can show a character's experience, reveal their personality, and present their relationship to another character.

Using dialogue to show relationships and motivations

Here are a few essential tips to help you write exceptional character-building dialogue:

Choose your words carefully. Word choice is everything! Give each of your characters a few linguistic quirks: words and phrases that only they use, or sentence structures they favor. For example, one character might often speak in elaborate sentences because they want to sound fancy.

When your characters speak to each *other*, ensure the phrasing reflects both their overall relationship and that particular conversation's tone. This can be tough to juggle with a large cast — but the more you practice switching among relationships, the easier it will be.

Give your characters goals for every conversation. Be mindful of your characters' motivations — both their overarching goals and what they're trying to accomplish in *this* conversation. Do they want something out of the other person? Is it a status battle? Or are they just trying to hurry the conversation along so they can leave?

Keep things moving. For readers to properly absorb a piece of dialogue, it needs to stay relatively short and sweet. Try to avoid more than 100 words of unbroken dialogue; action beats and description should punctuate longer conversations. If you do have more than 100 words of dialogue in a row, make sure it's pivotal to the plot.

Subtext in dialogue

Sometimes it's not about what a character is saying, but what they're *not* saying: a seemingly minor comment can imply a lot more that goes unsaid (hello, Iceberg Theory!).

In an early season of *The Office* (long before Jim and Pam get together), Jim is having a rough time of it. Repeatedly sidetracked from an important sales call, he goes on to lose the sale (and his commission). But at the end of the episode, Pam leans her head on his shoulder — prompting Jim to declare, "Not a bad day."

Though outwardly he's making a casual comment on a mundane topic, the subtext of his feelings for Pam (she can turn his whole day around in just a few moments!) suggests something far weightier.

Great "showing" dialogue

Leigh Bardugo's *Six of Crows* books are a masterclass in dialogue among many characters. Not only do each of her characters possess a distinctive voice, but they interact in wonderfully varied and exciting ways. Here's an excerpt that starts with the group's leader, Kaz, explaining how to pick a pocket:

> *"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.

From this, the reader can easily infer each character's personality and role in the group. Kaz is the smart, no-nonsense boss; Nina and Jesper are the wisecrackers; Inej is the thoughtful, compassionate one.

The dialogue also has a clear purpose — Kaz laying out a scenario they're going to replicate as part of a heist — and subtext in the form of Nina and Jesper sniping at each other to relieve their nerves about the upcoming mission.

Writing exercise

Take the one line of exposition below and relay the same information in a conversation between two characters. In addition to practicing your showing, use this opportunity to create two distinct voices.

Taylor had graduated top of his class from one of the
country's most prestigious universities, something Alex
struggled to believe.

Tip: Make sure your characters aren't just talking at each other

on an empty stage. Show them doing something — anything — while engaged in conversation.

Chapter 4 resources:

- [How to Write Natural Dialogue!](#) (blog)
- [Punctuating Dialogue: 12 Must-Know Tips for Writers](#) (blog)

Body Language Speaks Volumes

Whether the main characters in your story are people, animals, robots, or plants, it's vital that your readers *relate* to them on some level. If we're not invested in the characters, what's to keep us reading on to find out what happens to them? Even in the most action-packed novels, twists and turns will fall slack if readers aren't invested in the outcome of your characters.

One engaging way to establish that all-important reader-character connection is to indicate their feelings through body language. Instead of relying solely on "emotion words" (like sad, happy, or angry), use their physicality to bring their experiences to life.

The body never lies

The Nest by Cynthia D'Aprix Sweeney is a character-driven novel about the dysfunctional Plumb family. Consider the following examples, where Sweeney manages to convey different things about her characters through body language.

> *Bea suppressed the urge to roll her eyes.*

Instead of: Bea was annoyed.

"That's very funny," Jack said, without smiling.

Instead of: "That's very funny," Jack said sarcastically.

"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."

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

To get into the habit of using body language to convey emotion, write a list of feelings and the various ways in which they might physically manifest themselves. Here's a brief list to get you started!

Your body language cheatsheet

Afraid	Break into a cold sweat, shrink back, tremble, widen eyes, freeze, turn pale, quickened breathing
Angry	Go red, gesture sharply, stomp, shout, tense up, clench fist or jaw, narrow eyes
Bored	Look into space, tap fingers on table, sigh, yawn, fidget
Confident	Straighten posture, hold head higher, hold eye contact
Confused	Furrow brow, narrow eyes, tilt head
Embarrassed	Blush, avoid eye contact, shrink into self, cover face with hands
Happy	Smile, laugh, sigh contentedly, hum to oneself, clap hands together, blush
Nervous	Wring hands, bite lip, tap foot, fidget, pace, clammy hands
Sad	Hunch, cry, lose appetite, drag feet, look into space, frown, withdraw from others
Shocked	Widen eyes, cover mouth, jump, gasp, freeze, tense up

While authors will often show and tell when it comes to body

language (such as "Her eyes widened in shock"), try to let the physical expressions of your characters stand on their own as much as you can. By doing so, you will guide readers' inferences, while also giving them room to interpret your characters in their own ways. Remember, *showing* illustrates, while *telling* jumps straight to the facts.

Writing exercise

Write a basic conversation between two characters — such as a character asking someone about their day at work, or two people deciding what to cook for dinner. Instead of focusing on dialogue to reveal the characters' emotions or feelings, tell the story via body language. *Are the characters flirting? Is there frostiness between them? Is one of them on the verge of tears or hiding something from the other?* Use body language to layer in this subtext.

Chapter 5 Resources

- 8 Character Development Exercises to Nail Your Character (blog)
- How to Write a Compelling Character Arc (blog)

Show Through Action

One of the biggest mistakes all inexperienced authors do (okay, sometimes also the *pro's* too), is skim through a scene. Writing the few paragraphs which establish the scene: where the characters are, what they're talking, what they needed to do, all feels pretty good. Before you know it you've ended the scene and moved on. Boom! Book finished. Except...

Do those early drafts convey the plot we mean as a writer? Yup. We've checked off plot points clearly. We even moved characters from location to location, and had all the meaningful conversations we were supposed to have. On paper, the story hit all the marks. On paper, the story is done. Except...

The scenes themselves can end up feeling more like outline notes than an actual *story*, and a big part of the reason is that it doesn't include any action.

This isn't to say you should pack your story with fight scenes and car chases. "Action" is any movement that, along with dialogue, is the foundation for what propels your scenes forward.

Showing character moods and movements

When used carefully, action can reveal all sorts of things, from character to relationships to setting — or even a plot point. Just picture how much more powerful a scene would be if a woman flinches away when her husband goes to rest his hand on her back, as opposed to saying "he was making her uncomfortable." I don't know about you, but I flinched a little when I read that, transferring a sense of the character's discomfort right to me.

A lot of this will build off the last lesson, so hopefully, you've practiced those skills. But character movement goes a lot deeper than just their body language! We can see this in action with a very direct line from the first chapter of Katherine Addison's *The Goblin Emperor:*

> *The door opened with savage abruptness, and Setheris stood in the opening, glaring.*

Nowhere do we see *how* Setheris is standing, but we don't need to. His *actions* opening the door tell us all we need to understand that he's seriously peeved at the person on this side of the door.

Actions in the world around you

But action goes beyond just the movement of your *characters.* A gathering of enemy ships in the harbor can bring a sense of foreboding. The bustle of an airport and the "final boarding" calls ringing overhead can create anxiety as someone waits until the last possible second to get in line.

Consider the opening lines of Rakesh Satyal's *No One Can Pronounce My Name*:

> *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.*

It's not just Harit's movements here that give us clues to his personality — clumsy, concerned what other people think of him, perhaps a bit of a dreamer — but also the world's response to him: no one is paying nearly as much attention as he fears. From the bus "already pulling away" to the "dispersing" cloud, there's no reaction to Harit except ours as the reader, the sole witness to his inner life. Two lines, and we've already established several critical themes of Harit's character arc.

When working on your own story, keep the movements of your setting and your characters in mind. How can you convey indifference, lust, or greed through how they move about the world?

Now, you don't want to go *overboard* with action; readers don't need to see every time a character picks up their glass at dinner. Always ask yourself: does this action carry meaning? Or are they just scratching their arm because of an irrelevant itch?

Chapter 6 Resources

- Show Don't Tell with former Random House editor Jim Thomas (webinar)

Be Wary of 'Feeling' Words and Adverbs

> Takamaru was fuming. He couldn't believe that Hi-
> roko had hidden his passport. "Give it back to me,"
> he said angrily.

In this sentence from a book which I will never write, our lead character's emotions are directly stated. This is helpful to move the story forward, since knowing Taka's emotional state lets us understand his next move. But being told a character's emotional state and getting the reader to *relate* to his emotion are two different things: relating to emotion is just a step away from actually feeling it — the ultimate goal for any writer. So often for a reader, being *told* the emotions becomes counter-productive in its effect. We can *show* emotions without swerving off the cliffs into melodrama.

No one ever thinks to themselves, "I'm so sad!"

At its core, this part of the *show, don't tell* rule is all about realism. The best stories are the ones that invite readers to sink so deeply into the experience that they — even just for a moment — forget that it's not real. This sense of immersion comes when your

readers feel the same things that your characters do.

But no one is going to *experience* sadness just because you say, "John was very sad." They might feel a bit of *empathy* for John, but they won't be sharing in his sadness.

How often do you stop and put a name to the emotion you're feeling? Especially in the middle of an intense reaction, you're not exactly going to stop and declare, "This makes me really happy!" Usually, you just react to it. You say, "That's amazing!" or "Finally!" or even just shout with glee or do a happy dance.

The people around you don't need to be told that the news made you happy. They can see it in your body language, the joyful tone of your voice, the way your eyes light up, or how much you're biting your lip to keep from grinning.

Trust your readers to see your character's reaction, too. Rather than using emotional adjectives like "thrilled," "displeased," or "tormented," stop and picture how you react when you're feeling those things.

So long as you bring the right sort of reaction to the page, your readers will understand what's going on. Just keep an eye on the language you use so your characters aren't reacting to everything with the same five expressions — this is one area where you'll want to mix things up. And be sure not to slip back into telling with phrases like "he slammed the table angrily" — the verb itself should be enough to convey the emotion.

Listen to the voice in your head

Okay, but what if your character isn't as effusive as some people? Or if they're trying to hide their feelings from those around them? Don't you sometimes need their inner monologue to reflect their subtler or more buried feelings?

Even internal reactions can (and should) be shown. Again, stop and think about the way you react to things. What sort of thoughts run through your head? What are the physical sensations of fear, or anger, or joy?

Keep in mind that words like "thought," "felt," or "understood" are all *telling* words. And while it's sometimes necessary to use them (more on that in lesson 9), we also want you to show us the character's thought process as Michael Chabon does in *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier & Clay*:

> *"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.*

While Chabon first tells us that Sammy was "sick with envy," he then *shows* us why — allowing the reader to understand his state of mind.

Chapter 7 Resources:

- [Should You Use Adverbs in Your Writing?](#) (YouTube video)
- [20 Writing Tips to Become a Better Writer](#) (blog)

Purple Prose

What is purple prose?

Purple prose is writing so stylistically embellished that it muddles the reader's understanding of what's going on. Symptoms include excessive adjectives and adverbs, overblown similes and metaphors, faux-philosophical musings that drag out way too long — or, heaven forbid, all of the above.

   We've all seen purple prose from time to time. Hell, we've all probably written it (hands up!). The key is to recognize when your writing veers too far in this direction so that you can pull it back. It's especially crucial to watch out for purple prose when *showing* in your story, as evocative descriptions can easily slip into overwrought, distracting prose — which defeats the immersive purpose of SDT.

A quick example of purple prose

For those who may not be sure where the line is, here's a "purple" passage I've just whipped up:

> *When it comes to the nature of fraternal relations, the*

> *tragic melancholy of each unit is vastly different from the seemingly similar next, and those who remain buoyantly disposed are actually fundamentally identical. The strange befuddlement that befell the normally calm household that morning was the unfortunate result of the husband's unscrupulous infidelity, and the righteously indignant wife declared that her residence was to quickly and violently diverge from his.*

Unreadable, right? If this scene sounds at all familiar, it's only because it's a way-too-adverbial version of *Anna Karenina's* opening lines:

> *Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way. Everything was confusion in the Oblonskys' house. The wife had discovered that the husband was carrying on an intrigue with a French girl... and she had announced to her husband that she could not go on living in the same house as him.*

The second passage is much clearer and more striking, while the first is bloated with 50-cent words. And while this distinction is easy to grasp, avoiding purple prose in your own writing is more challenging than you'd think! To that end, here are a few concrete tips to help you SDT without purpling out.

How to avoid purple prose

Scrutinize longer sentences. Run-ons are a hallmark of purple prose, as are sentences that aren't technically run-ons but have way too many words. For each sentence longer than 25 words

or so, ask yourself: do you need all of that? 99% of the time, the answer is no.

Replace adjectives and adverbs with strong verbs. Martin touched on this in yesterday's lesson, but adjectives and adverbs crumble in the wake of verbs. To make your writing more concise and powerful, cut these telling descriptors in favor of showing actions: "She cried forcefully and hysterically" → "She gasped and sobbed."

Don't force figurative language. If you have to struggle for a metaphor — or if upon rereading, it just sounds bizarre — do yourself and your readers a favor and skip it. (I'm reminded of [Zadie Smith critiquing Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland*](), in which taxis are likened to grapefruits, and cricket balls to "giant meteoritic cranberries"; needless to say, not every comparison can be a winner.)

Get someone else to read your writing. And if you, like me, sometimes can't bear to kill your darlings, get an editor to do it for you. What you might perceive as an uncuttable sentence, they'll hack apart without mercy — and again, to paraphrase Hemingway, your writing will be better for it.

Psst: Need an editor to de-purple your prose? Hundreds of the world's best literary editors are right here on Reedsy. [Sign up for your free account]() and connect with them today.

With these tools in your arsenal, you'll slowly become more style-conscious and careful not to overdo it in the prose department. Still, you might be wondering: how can I *show* everything

in my story without lapsing into purple prose from time to time?

Well then, onwards to the next chapter.

Chapter 8 Resources:

- What Is Purple Prose? And How to Avoid It (blog)
- 265+ Forceful Verbs to Turn You Into a Literary Tyrannosaurus (blog)

When to Tell instead of Show

As we near the end of this course, it's time for a third-act twist: **sometimes, you need to tell instead of show.**

The crowd gasps. A gentleman faints in the back row. But you heard me right — a little bit of telling can be just the ticket to glossing over anything that doesn't *really* matter and quickly getting to something that readers actually care about.

Getting to the good stuff

One of my favorite pieces of advice is "enter late, leave early" — a philosophy that applies to both my writing and social life. It's the reason why you rarely start a chapter with something like:

> *Kelly entered the Pig & Whistle, hung up her coat, and ordered a Sierra Nevada before sitting down. "Hello," she said. "How are you doing?"*
> *"Good, good. And you?" Vinay chirped back.*
> *"Good."*

Instead, you'll want to start a scene just as things are getting interesting. In this case, we'll cut to the middle of their conversation, when Vinay drops the big news.

> *"You're dumping me?" Kelly said through gritted teeth,*
> *her bottle of Sierra Nevada threatening to shatter in her*
> *grip. They'd been in the corner booth of the Pig & Whistle*
> *for twenty-three minutes before Vinay finally mustered*
> *the courage to tell her.*

The reader gets enough information to orient themselves within the scene, but they're spared all the awkward small talk — and now you, the writer, have more space to *show* the fallout of this reveal in vivid detail.

This type of narrative telling is especially useful when characters reveal things to each other that the reader already knows. Nothing is more tiresome than a novel repeating the same fact over and over.

Laying groundwork

Telling can also be used to lay the groundwork for a story or scene before it kicks off, as in a prologue. Prologues are especially popular in speculative fiction, where authors may wish to orient readers in the elaborate world of their book before initiating the story.

For example, the prologue to J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* is called 'Concerning Hobbits,' a pages-long essay detailing the culture and history of his heroes.

> *Hobbits are an unobtrusive but very ancient people, more*
> *numerous formerly than they are today; for they love*
> *peace and quiet and good tilled earth: a well-ordered*
> *and well-farmed countryside was their favourite haunt.*

This prologue is a whole load of *telling* — though, interestingly, Tolkien frames it as an extract from a history book published in Middle Earth. It offers a 'wide-angle' introduction to Tolkien's world without taking readers out of its reality.

As a reader, I am not a huge fan of prologues. I'd rather start the story and catch up on the backstory as the action unfolds. That said, I also know plenty of readers who love immersing themselves in the lore of a fictional world before the opening chapter — and again, this type of *telling* may be extra-useful if you have a lot of worldbuilding to convey.

Quickly communicating an idea

Unnecessary tangents affect your scenes' pacing, and too many detours away from your book's action can kill your storytelling momentum. The key here is to only *show* the details that matter.

Let's say that a secondary character, Kevin, loses his car keys. Unless it matters *how* he lost them, don't fill three pages with details of him shambling around his house, fruitlessly patting his pockets. Instead, you could:

- **Offer a quick vignette** — *As Kevin would later discover, his car keys were accidentally posted to the IRS along with his tax returns.*
- **Reveal it in dialogue** — *"I lost my keys," Kevin said.*
- **Simply state it in the narration** — *Kevin had lost his keys.*

The less crucial something is to the story you're telling, the fewer words you should devote to it — which is where telling can definitely come in handy.

Establishing a change in time or place

True devotees to the Church of Show Don't Tell can always find sensory ways to indicate where and when a scene takes place: the church clock chiming twelve, an issue of *The Denver Post* tucked under someone's arm.

But sometimes, these details hinder the pace and momentum of your storytelling. So don't be afraid to tell the readers where and when they are and get on with the story — "It was noon in Denver and Lena was late for pilates again."

To sum this all up: Showing is a great way to approach your writing. But if describing something in great sensory detail doesn't progress the story, don't sweat it. Just tell it.

Chapter 9 Resources

- Dialogue Examples, Great Passages Analyzed (blog)
- Exposition in Literature (blog)

Excellent Examples of 'Show, don't Tell'

You've made it to the end of our *Show, Don't Tell* course and booklet. Yay! Let's celebrate with a few examples of the golden rule in action.

Imbolo Mbue's Behold the Dreamers

In this scene, we get an unmistakable sense of the character's nerves, preoccupation, and an urgent need for his interview to go well — as well as the stakes if it *doesn't*.

> *Try as he might, he could do nothing but think about the questions he might be asked, the answers he would need to give, the way he would have to walk and talk and sit, the times he would need to speak or listen and nod, the things he would have to say or not say, the response he would need to give if asked about his legal status in the country.*
>
> *His throat went dry. His palms moistened. Unable to reach for his handkerchief in the packed downtown subway, he wiped both palms on his pants.*

Gillian Flynn's Gone Girl

While onomatopoeias may feel like they belong on a vocabulary schoolwork sheet, they can be a great way to *show.* In this case, Flynn uses them to conjure the familiar sounds of a busy kitchen, and she ties it off with the vivid "culinary orchestra" metaphor.

> *My morning breath warmed the pillow, and I changed the subject in my mind. Today was not a day for second-guessing or regret, it was a day for doing. Downstairs, I could hear the return of a long-lost sound: Amy making breakfast. Banging wooden cupboards (rump-thump!), rattling containers of tin and glass (ding-ring!), shuffling and sorting a collection of metal pots and iron pans (ruzz-shuzz!). A culinary orchestra tuning up, clattering vigorously toward the finale.*

J.R.R. Tolkien's The Two Towers

Just as the film's notorious Mordor theme evokes darkness and danger, the following description uses particular words to bring about images of death, decay, and menace. Though some might say Tolkien takes showing to an extreme when describing his settings.

> *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.

Tracey Lindberg's Birdie

This short excerpt is a good example of showing and telling.

> *She walked in and the smell of fresh bread and buns wrapped around her and hugged her. Auntie Val always baked on nights as cold as this one.*

To start, our senses are enlisted with the mention of fresh bread. While this is a universally-pleasing smell, the use of the words "wrapped around her" and "hugged her" further illustrates that Birdie needs comforting.

Next, we are told that Auntie Val bakes on cold nights — and while the cold could have been shown by Birdie dusting snow off her shoulders or immediately relaxing as she entered the warm room, this quick line also gives us backstory: baking is one of Auntie Val's traditions when the weather gets especially frigid.

Remember to sign up for your free Reedsy account. If you need an editor to help you take your writing to the next level, you know where to find them!

Writing exercise

Watch this short scene on the beach from the end of *The Shawshank Redemption* and adapt it into a written scene. Convey it using *showing* language (it doesn't matter if you've never seen the film).

Be selective about whose perspective you choose for this scene:

if you're showing the scene from the perspective of the man sanding the boat, focus on his senses and emotional reactions. If you're writing it from Morgan Freeman's perspective, how can you show his experience of that moment?

Regardless of who you've chosen, we wish you all the best with your writing. Now get out there, and start *showing* the world your story abilities!

How to Write a Novel

Enjoy the 10-day course and booklet? Feeling inspired to keep going?

If you're keen to keep learning, and are interested in brushing off the novel idea that's been languishing in your head, then we've got something for you.

Our brand-new novel writing course is here! Over the course of 101 days, author and bestselling ghostwriter Tom Bromley will help you build your fiction toolkit and develop a writing routine that will get you to the finish line on your first draft.

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Enroll now →

If you have any questions, just email learning@reedsy.com!

Resources

We also thought it'd be handy to have all the resources in one spot. Here they are:

- Reedsy's blog post about character quirks (blog)
- What is the Theme of Your Story? [Iceberg Theory] (blog)
- Setting of a Story: What Is It? And How to Write It (blog)
- How to Write Natural Dialogue! (blog)
- Punctuating Dialogue: 12 Must-Know Tips for Writers (blog)
- Characters' motivations (blog)
- 8 Character Development Exercises to Nail Your Character (blog)
- How to Write a Compelling Character Arc (blog)
- Show Don't Tell with former Random House editor Jim Thomas (webinar)
- Should You Use Adverbs in Your Writing? (YouTube video)
- 20 Writing Tips to Become a Better Writer (blog)
- What Is Purple Prose? And How to Avoid It (blog)
- 250+ Forceful Verbs to Turn You Into a Literary Tyrannosaurus (blog)
- Dialogue Examples, Great Passages Analyzed (blog)
- Exposition in Literature (blog)

The RBE (Reedsy's Book Editor)

A simpler way to write

Our beautiful writing app is sleek and optimized to be distraction-free. With authors in mind, our formatting toolbar is intuitive and makes it easy to apply styles as you write.

Set daily writing goals

The Reedsy Book Editor can help you be accountable for your writing practice. By tracking your daily, weekly, and monthly writing progress, our app can help you write your book (not just talk about it).

Professional themes, perfect for ebooks and print

Once you're ready to think about publishing, you can look at our typesetting features.

Authors and publishers no longer need to rely on expensive typesetting processes. You can **learn more about how to format your book here**, but know that RBE's easy-to-use export controls are already tuned for your benefit. You can produce a beautiful book in seconds, for free!

Distribution ready

Exported files are ready for instant distribution to retailers, distributors and POD services such as Smashwords, IngramSpark, Amazon Kindle Direct Publishing, Apple iBooks, and Kobo Writing Life.

Professional assistance

Finished your draft and looking for an editor? Luckily, we have a marketplace for that! Bring in expert assistance, and work with them directly on your manuscript.

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About the Author

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