

Overview

In the spring of 2006, I decided that I'd write a novel. I was already working as a writer, editor and researcher. However, a novel was still a big step, let me explain...

I've always been a book nerd. I still remember the first 'real' book I read. It was *The Hobbit* by J.R.R. Tolkien. I must have been about seven or eight when I'd checked it out of my local library and spent the next weeks reading the book a chapter a night. After each chapter, I'd tuck the hardback book under my pillow and sleep on the novel. A habit I still do to this day. I've been a serial reader ever since, replacing one book with the next. However, despite my love of books my chosen career was science, or biology, to be more precise. After studying at university, I worked in a brewing company before moving to the pharmaceutical industry, a dream job at the time. I lasted about a year. I was never comfortable with the cost/care choices that drug companies need to make on a daily basis; so one afternoon, I handed in my notice and walked away from my job. Needless to say my six month pregnant wife was less than impressed. I knew I wanted to write and I'd always had a passion for history, so with the goal of writing history books in mind, I enrolled on a

masters degree in military history. As part of my course, I needed to write a thesis. I picked the subject of courage and how it was reflected in non-military society. During my research, I came across the story of a soldier who had been awarded a gallantry medal but, the author was insisting, was a bully and all round bad guy. The author was Terry Deary, of Horrible Histories fame, (Horrible Histories is a non-fiction history book series. It has sold millions of copies world wide and was later converted into a successful TV series). Terry had failed to name the soldier, so I emailed and asked if he had the source to the original research. We exchanged a number of emails and hit it off. Our friendship grew and Terry asked me to join him as a full time researcher. I ended up working on Horrible Histories for a number of years, slowly developing from a researcher to an editor. This was the first place I really learned to edit a book for the professional market. I was able to see the importance of 'story' and how removing the 'deadwood' was essential to the process. We approached each section of each book with one simple question - 'Is this boring?' If the answer was yes, then the section was cut. It was also during this period that I picked up my first book deal. Terry had been asked to write a kid's history book about William Wallace, the Scottish hero. He said no, but suggested me as an alternative. It resulted in my first deal. In fact, it was a two book

deal. Once these books were written and in print, they opened the doors to more opportunities. I wrote a series of kid's history books about different heroes. I also wrote another series about Scottish heroes and inventors. This success allowed me to land an agent and with his help I pitched an idea for a choose-your-own-adventure series based on battles. This series, called *Battle Books*, was picked up by Hachette.

It was at this point I decided I'd write that novel. Looking back I do feel embarrassed at my naïveté. OK, I'd had a lot of success writing kid's history books, but they weren't full blown adult novels, yet I set off on my novel writing journey the same way as many. I planned out a rough outline and dived into the first chapter. Within the space of a couple of weeks I had four chapters written. Eager to get some kind of validation I asked Terry Deary to read my opening. Less than a day after getting the manuscript he rang me and explained that what I'd written was... well... crap. I was devastated. After all I was a 'published author'. In the days that followed Terry and I had a number of conversations about writing fiction and he started to open my eyes.

I learn two important lessons. The first was the statement, made in passing by Terry, that 'readers don't care about events, they only care about how characters react to events'. This stuck with me and

like some writing parasite wriggled deep into my brain. Over the years I've thought a lot about that simple statement. In fact, I don't think it goes too far to say that it changed the way I see writing. The second lesson was more obvious - I didn't really know anything about writing fiction. Up until that point, I'd been bluffing. In fact, I was mimicking writers I knew and respected, doing what I thought they'd do, but lacking any real deeper understanding as to why and to what end. That needed to change. For the next year, I immersed myself in just about every writing book you can find. I read, made notes, read more, made more notes. I was obsessed.

At first, the art of writing seemed almost mystical, with writers offering vague advice that made no real sense - 'write from the heart', 'write what you know' etc. All great sound bites but of little real value. Yet, as I read more books I started to see a pattern. I read countless books but two books really crystallised my understanding. The first was *Story* by Robert McKee. In fact, a copy of this dog-eared book still sits on my desk and is consulted on a regular bases. *Story* is a screenwriting book but it gave me one essential lesson - the importance of structure. This was the book that managed to pull together all of those threads and lay out structure in a way that made sense. More importantly, I finally

grasped how structure could be used in a repeatable manner to write better books. I began to see how I could use, and control, structure to improve the reader's experience. The second breakthrough came thanks to my scientific background. As a research scientist I'd been more than happy to look through hundreds of published academic papers in search of knowledge. It was no different for writing. The second key was not actually a book, but a paper. It is called *Hemingway's Early Manuscripts: The Theory and Practice of Omission*. It was written by Paul Smith in 1983 and published in the *Journal of Modern Literature*. Ernest Hemingway had developed a theory of writing, which today we might call Minimalism. He suggested that by removing elements from a story it strengthens the narrative and engages the reader. This was exactly what we'd been doing with *Horrible Histories*. It was the final piece of the jigsaw.

The combination of McKee and Hemingway were a revelation. For the first time, not only did novels make sense but I knew how to make novels better. I'd learned a secret that I needed to share.

I'd first edited books back at my time with *Horrible Histories* but now I wanted to apply my new theories in practice. My wife, who is a novelist, creative writer lecturer and editor, suggested that we should set up an editing business. This would allow me to develop my ideas with real writers and manuscripts; BubbleCow was born. The

business allowed me to develop and refine my ideas and within a year I had developed a system that could be applied to any novel. I realised that by tweaking the current understanding of showing, not telling (a well worn and often misunderstood concept) I was able to teach writers to create better novels.

I recently calculated that I've edited in excess of 500 novels. These have included award winners, bestsellers and many very poor manuscripts. With each novel I have been able to apply, test and refine my theories. This book is a crystallisation of everything I have learn about writing and editing since I started on my journey. I have tried to shy away from the deep theory, though there are some important concepts included. Instead, I have included the simple to understand techniques that I have developed and taught whilst editing.

What follows is a guide to what I have learned and how you can apply these lessons to become a better writer.

So You Want to Be a Better Writer?

I have good news and bad news, there's always bad news.

First, the bad news.

For years, teachers (whether at school or in creative writing

workshops) have been teaching you the wrong stuff about the best way to write. You've been given a 'bum steer', as my grandfather used to say. You've been sold a pup.

You see, all that stuff about flowery prose, about having a narrator tell the story and about 'powerful words', has seeped into your brain and made you a bad writer.

There, I've said it.

But, let's not blame the teachers, like all well-meaning busybodies, they know no better. They are just teaching you what they think is right.

Devastating, I know. But, dry your tears, here comes the good news.

In the following pages, I am going to teach you how to write like a pro. I'll show you the techniques that famous writers, such as Ernest Hemingway and F. Scot Fitzgerald developed and used to create some of the most memorable and original work in the human language. And here's the best news. It's easy. (Well, that's not true, it is always *simple*, but not always that easy. But I don't think you were ready to hear that just yet, so let's stick with easy.)

You don't believe me?

Ok, here's a simple technique that you can immediately apply to your writing. Without reading another chapter of this book, this one

technique will make you a better writer. Later on, we will delve into the theory behind this technique, but at this moment I just want to show you I'm the real deal. No stinky bull here.

It goes like this...

Take a scene from your book (any scene, I don't care) and then re-imagine the scene as if the narrator is looking through a camera. Picture the scene in your mind's eye. See the action and hear the words.

Now... re-write the scene JUST describing what the narrator can see and hear. If the narrator can't see it or hear it, it stays off the page.

That's important.

If the narrator can't see something, it can't go into the scene. That means, no thoughts and no internal dialogue, just plain old action and conversation; you will be forced to describe the action as it happens.

Perhaps what is more important is what you are forced NOT to write.

If describing only what the camera can see, then two important elements are immediately removed from your writing:

1. Internal dialogue.
2. Backstory.

If you need to pass on a vital nugget of information about the main character's past, then the only option you have is to do it via dialogue. If you want to tell the reader that the main character is sad, you must SHOW the reader the character is sad (tears etc.) with description of actions. That means the removal of the classic "he was sad" line.

And that's it.

If you are able to apply this Camera Technique to your work, you will be a better writer. Promise. Just try it.

The Camera Technique is the foundation of the way you will be taught to write in this book. A method of writing that will stimulate emotion in your readers and help produce memorable books. The remainder of this book is a description of how and why this technique works so well. Yet it is not dry theory, instead you will be given detailed and pragmatic examples of how you can apply the theory to your writing.

Writing Books Readers Want to Read

Did you know that just under half the people who start reading a book will not get past the first hundred pages? This means that about half the people who pick up your book will just give up before they reach

the mid-point. The flip side, of course, is that about half of your readers will persevere.

But how many of these will finish?

Well in a recent survey, only 38% of readers said they would read to the end of a book, no matter what. This is shocking.

In a world where book prices are lower than ever, access to books, especially digitally, is almost unlimited and readers are prepared to take a gamble on new and unknown writers, your job as a writer is clear.

You must write books that excite and engage readers. If you don't they'll just stop reading.

If you are going to write exciting books, you must first understand what makes a reader stop?

Well, some of the obvious candidates play a part. Readers suggest that dislike of the main character plays a part, as does weak writing and a poor plot. Yet, these are not the key reasons readers give up. There is one reason, far beyond any other, that stops people reading. The single biggest reason people stop reading is that they found the book boring.

This should be like a dagger through your writer's heart. After all,

how can a reader find your story boring? You've sweated blood over the plot, thought for countless hours about characters and even written out painstaking back-story for your world and its inhabitants.

The reader must be wrong. Your book's not boring...

Or is it?

Well here's a secret; it's probably your fault (and the fault of those busy body teachers).

You are not doing it on purpose, and you've probably never been told you are doing it, but you might just be writing boring books.

Before you start typing out that 'Dear Gary' angry email let me explain...

It is not what you are writing but the way you are writing. Writers often become tangled up their book's story (lets call it **plot**) more than the way in which the book is written (we'll call this **structure**, though it is also technique). Let's say this again, for many writers the **plot** is more important than the **structure**. They've been told that 'story sells', that readers are looking for 'a good story' even that 'the story will win out', and this is true, story is essential. But the problem is that with a 100% focus on story, there's no time to consider structure.

So let's readdress that balance. A novel consists of two key elements:

1. Story - this is the book's plot.

2. The way in which the story is told - this is the book's structure.

Simple so far, so let's throw in one of those gems that will change the way you look at books.

Story and structure are separate. You can tell the same story in a number of different ways. It is possible to have the same basic story but alter the way in which it is delivered to the reader via the structure of the novel.

But what's this got to do with boring books?

You see, it may not be that your story is boring. It is far much more likely that the technique you are using to tell your story is intrinsically boring. I am not saying you are a bad writer. I am saying that you haven't been shown the best way to write non-boring books. This stuff isn't obvious; you will not know it unless you've been shown.

Storytelling is a natural process. We are weaned on stories, our life is told in stories and our brains are hardwired to understand, consume and think in stories. In short, being a storyteller is natural, being a writer requires a new understanding.

So what does this mean in the real world of Amazon reviews?

If you are a great storyteller, but a poor technical writer, you will produce boring novels. On the flip side, if you are a poor storyteller, but a great technical writer you will also produce a boring novel. Remember, our definition of boring is a book a reader fails to finish. If you are to produce a novel that will engage and inspire a reader, you need skills in both story telling and story writing.

Now for more good and bad news.

The bad news first. Storytellers are born, not taught (in my view). Being able to tell a good story is something in your bones. If you can't tell a good story then stop reading now, I am wasting your time. However, the chances are that if you are even considering writing a novel, then you have the storytelling bug.

Now, here's the good news... writing technique can be taught.

In fact, unless you have been shown how to write in a way that will engage your reader, then you will be grasping in the dark. We all have some latent knowledge, which we have picked up by reading novels. However, without understanding the principles behind the writing techniques, you will be flying blind.

You can't teach someone to know how to use words effectively and

beautifully. You can help people who can write to write more effectively and you can probably teach people a lot of little tips for writing a novel, but I don't think somebody who cannot write and does not care for words can ever be made into a writer. It just is not possible. -

P.D.James

Now... time for a little honesty.

There are many ways to write novels, though the basic principals remain the same. For years, editors and writers have been arguing over the best practices. Some suggest that large amounts of description are essential, others that anything other than the most basic description is unnecessary. What's more, what has been considered the 'best' writing technique has changed over time.

Take MOBY DICK, for example. The book is, rightly, considered to be one of the greatest novels ever written. However, it would struggled to be published today in the format it was written. In places, the technique used is simply outdated. You will find not only large narrative 'lectures' on a wide variety of topics, including Melville's thoughts of the taxation of fisherman, but also whole chapters on the debate over whether a whale is a fish or a mammal (SPOILER - it's a mammal). Yet, Melville remains a great storyteller. There is little doubt that if MOBY DICK were written today, it would be a very different novel.

This all said, there is once strand that ties all novels together, no matter when they were written. **The aim of a novel is to tap into an emotional truth and shine a light on human nature.** Novel writers, as all artists, are in the business of stimulating emotion. After all, that's the point of a good story other to highlight a universal truth? When considering the best way to write a novel, you must ask yourself one simple question - what's the best way to express emotion?

We our looking to create books that truly touch a reader and alter the way they view the world. The ability to find and express emotion, at a level beyond the words, must be the aim of all novels. How do you make the reader feel? Writers must always be striving to discover the truth behind the words and tap directly into the reader's emotional honesty. Without this drive writing a novel stops being an act of 'art' and simply becomes an act of entertainment.

So how is this done?

In a novel format, there are three places emotion can be expressed:

1. The dialogue.
2. The actions.
3. The reader's mind.

Let's just dwell on this a moment. It is easy to see how dialogue can

express emotion. However, the emotion we elicit via words is the emotion felt of the characters. It is not the deeper, universal emotion, which great novels seek to spark in the reader. Notice the difference? We are looking to stimulate emotion in the reader and this is not the same as emotional characters.

For example, let's take the novel THE COLOR PURPLE. This novel stirs deep universal emotions. It seeks to stimulate the reader to consider the truths behind the human desire for freedom. This is a universal emotion. A deep truth. So where will a writer find these universal emotions? The answer, ironically is in the mind of the reader. As a writer you are not inventing emotions, you are just trying to stimulate them. That's what we mean by 'truthful writing', that is writing that stimulates a universal truth. The words and actions of a novel are the key to unlocking these emotions.

So how is this done?

The answer, for us, starts with Ernest Hemingway.

The great American writer developed a writing technique he called the Iceberg Theory. It is a theory that has been built upon and developed over the years. It is also the foundation for the writing techniques you will learn in this book. The Iceberg Theory's foundational concept is that universal emotions exist. These are deep, truthful

emotions that are shared by all readers. All readers will understand, at a subconscious level, emotions such as happiness, sadness and the infinite shades between. The goal of the writer is to tap into these emotions. Since these true emotions are understood at a gut level, words attempting to 'describe' the emotions are, at best, ineffective. Instead, a writer must use the words and actions of their character to reflect these deeper emotions, in the process unlocking them for the reader.

By showing the reader events, situations and conversations that are born from these emotions, they are, in turn, stimulated in a reader. This sounds all very airy-fairy but the result is simple.

Think of it this way... have you ever cried when reading a book or watching a film? I am thinking that unless you have a waxy pea-sized heart the answer is yes. Well, that book/film tapped into a true emotion and stimulated this emotion in your mind, hence the tears.

So this sounds complicated, right?

Well, the techniques you need are, actually, simple.

You must focus your energies on developing characters that act in a 'truthful' manner. It is these character's action and dialogue that will stimulate the emotion your reader.

I'll say it again, since it is the key concept of this book.

You must write in a way that forces the reader to engage with your characters.

You do this by describing to the reader what your characters and doing and saying. The readers will then imagine the scenes in their own mind as they unfold. Brains are weird things and even have trouble confusing thoughts with reality. Therefore, as the scenes unfold, you will experience the emotions that these scenes stimulate. The result is that you must describe (or SHOW) as much as possible. This means less telling the reader what to see and think and more showing of events and words. The lack of TELL creates a 'space' between the reader and the novel's characters; it is in this space that the emotion grows. The beauty of the approach (apart from the fact it works) is that you will NOT need to learn any new, complicated techniques. In fact, for this way of writing to work you will be doing less, not more. You will discover a simple set of rules, that when applied, will bring the Iceberg Theory to life.

In the following chapters we will take a pragmatic look at the way you should be writing. We will look at each element in turn and set out a toolbox of simple techniques you can use in your day-to-day writing.

Engaging Your Reader

A boring book is one that a reader fails to find interesting, but let's put that differently, a boring book is one in which the reader fails to *engage*.

The idea of **engagement** is essential, so I want to reinforce its meaning in this context. Engagement is when a reader is emotionally invested in a book. Remember that feeling when you can't wait to get back to a novel you are reading? Yeah? Well, that's engagement. What about the feeling of shock when a character you love is killed off? We are all looking at you J.K.. Well, you've guessed it, that's also engagement.

Sorry, we are on the verge of jargon here, so let's delve a little deeper before it all gets out of hand.

A reader that is engaged in your book is active.

A reader that is not engaged in your book (thinks it boring) is passive.

The best way to explain the concept of 'active reading' is with an example.

Let's say you are writing a novel about a petty criminal, we'll call him John. As the main character of your book, John will have a

detailed back-story. One of the key elements of this back-story is that John is scared of dogs. The fear of dogs will play an important part in the climax of the story and is, therefore, an important plot point.

The reader needs to know about John's dog fear. The question is - how do you show the reader that John is scared of dogs?

You have two choices, one will leave the reader actively engaged; the other will produce a passive, bored reader.

The easiest option is to 'dump' the back-story via the narrator. This is the process of using the narrator to TELL the reader about the back-story.

You could write this into the first chapter of your book:

'John had always been scared of dogs. Just the sound of a distant bark would bring him out in a cold sweat. His mother had always insisted this fear had sprung from an incident when he was just a baby. Apparently, a large black Labrador had jumped into John's pram, nipping his hand whilst snatching a melting ice cream. John wasn't one for psychology. He just knew he hated dogs.'

Seems OK, right?

Here, the narrator is TELLING the reader about John's fear of dogs.

You have ticked the box entitled 'tell reader John is scared of dogs'

and you are free to write the more exciting scenes. The problem is that this approach leaves the reader in a passive stance. They simply have to 'sit back' as the narrator spoon-feeds the key elements of the plot. The reader is not required to do any work. They are just given the information. They don't have to piece together any clues, or interpret any actions, or even read between the lines to see what a section of dialogue is really about. It is all there, no confusion.

Not convinced?

Well it may seem fine for this one example, but imagine a whole book of this back-story 'dumping'. Each time the writer needs to TELL the reader about an important plot point, they just dump it into the narrative and tick off the box. This way each plot point, and back-story element, is spoon fed to the reader, who sits back and lets it happen. It quickly becomes, well... boring.

YAWN...

So, if we can't 'dump' the back-story, what's the option? The second choice is to actively engage the reader. This requires more work, more skill, more thought, but the rewards are astounding. With this approach, the writer doesn't TELL the reader that John is scared of dogs, instead the writer SHOWS the reader by leaving clues. You must force the reader to work for the plot, sifting the story to find the

plot elements that are important.

So what do you do?

Let's go back to our mate John. If you remember John's fear of dogs is a major plot point and we need to let the reader know. At first, there's no need to write a new scene. Just begin by taking a scene from the start of the book and adding in a description of a passing dog. Nothing spectacular, just a dog on the street, blink and you'll miss it. John sees the dog and acts. You don't write in any new dialogue, just a few lines of description where John sees the animal and crosses the street to avoid the dog. It is essential that the narrator describes the action but offers no explanation. The narrator must not TELL the reader why John is acting in the way that is described. Now, let's jump forward. Imagine there's a scene, at a key point in the book, in which John, having just committed a crime, is running from the police. John knows a short cut down an alley. He turns into the alley and sees a dog. John stops in his tracks, turns around, and chooses to take a different route. He is nearly caught in the process. Again, this is action only. The narrator must not TELL the reader why John is acting, just a description of his actions. Nothing is said about the dog, beyond a description of John's actions. John sees the dog and reacts. It is up to the reader to draw his or her own conclusions. Finally, you write a new scene. In this,

John and his partner in crime are in a car. John sees a dog in the nearby park. He looks at the dog and shakes his head, muttering under his breath. His partner asks, "What is it with you and dogs?" And you are off... Now you can write a conversation (it must be via dialogue), in which John talks about his hatred of dogs. Perhaps he relates the 'ice-cream-in-the-pram' story, it is up to you. You already have the back-story in your head, how much of this you give to the reader is your choice. What is essential is that the reader learns of John's fear via conversation, NOT the narrator.

What you are doing here is writing a scene in which you can present dialogue that passes the back-story in a convincing manner. John's friend has seen John's reaction to dogs, it would only be natural for it to pop into conversation. This conversation then becomes a vehicle for you to present back-story.

I would like to go one step further.

It would be perfectly acceptable for you, the writer, to never explain John's fear of dogs to the reader. You could remove completely the conversation and just have John reacting to dogs. The important aspect is that you, the writer, understands John's fear and how he will react in any given situation.

Have you ever seen the Indiana Jones series of films? In these, Indy

often encounters snakes. In *Raiders Of The Lost Ark* there is this exchange:

Indiana: There's a big snake in the plane, Jock!

Jock: Oh, that's just my pet snake Reggie.

Indiana: I hate snakes, Jock! I hate 'em!

Jock: Come on! Show a little backbone, will ya!

The viewer is never given a reason for Indy's fear of snakes. Does the writer, George Lucas, know the reason? Perhaps. Does it matter that the reader is never told? Absolutely not, Indy's fear, is just a tool to humanize the character and help the viewer to engage. As part of Indy's back-story it helps the writer to predict how Indy will react in a situation that involves snakes.

The only thing you must NOT do is to have the narrator explain the back-story via narrative summary.

Wow... that's an import little statement.

For all of this to work, you are relying on one trick of the brain. In day-to-day life we see people acting and hear people speaking, but we have no explanation for their reasons or motivations. Our brain has become very good at seeing meaning in words and actions. At the most basic level, if a man looks angry, is carrying a big stick and running towards us shouting, 'Die', then our brain must work out what

is going on pretty fast.

This means that whenever your brain sees an event or hears words of conversation it will automatically try to work out the meaning behind the words and actions. This is where the magic happens. It is this action of the brain that you, as a writer, are trying to harness.

If you can write event in which people act convincing but don't explain why, your brain will do the rest and add in a meaning. The same goes for conversation. Your brain will naturally look for a meaning between the lines. If you write truthfully (as in true to the nature of people), your brain will see deeper meaning. That's why when John runs from the dog, your brain is trying to work out why.

Another way to think of this is that you are trying to create a distance between the reader and the character.

By not explaining why John is scared of the dog, the reader is forced to fill in the blanks. Perhaps the reader is also scared of dogs and overlays their own fear. Even if they are not scared of dogs, we are all scared of something. Your brain recognizes fear when it sees it. There is something in all of our lives that will, metaphorically, make us cross the street. After all, fear is the deepest of human emotions.

So... here's the next level. By forcing the reader to recognize fear

and look for that emotion in their own memory banks, we are triggering a deeper truth than we can ever express in words. The reader sees John's fear and actually, at some level, experiences fear.

The key point here is that by altering the way you write, by moving away from narrative summary and towards words and actions, you are forcing the reader from a passive stance into an active stance. When you write in a way that creates a narrative space between the reader and the characters, the reader will 'lean in' and engage with your book.

In the most simplistic terms:

- Narrative summary (dumping back-story) = TELL.
- Passing back-story via dialogue and actions = SHOW.

A word of warning here... You are going to learn to use show, don't tell in a way that moves far beyond anything taught in a creative writing class. Writing in this manner is more than a simple technique, it is a new writing methodology. In fact, show, don't tell will become your mantra. The application of this one simple phrase is the key to unlocking your novel and creating active prose that sucks the reader into your story. You will find that by simply asking, 'Am I SHOWING or TELLING?' you will lift your novel to the highest

possible level.

The trick is now to forget the theory and to learn the simple techniques that will allow you to build the Show Don't Tell Methodology into the very fabric of your writing. It's this task that we will be addressing in the remainder of this book.

To apply the Show, Don't Tell Methodology to a wider novel you will need to focus on four key aspects:

1. Characterization.
2. Dialogue.
3. Description.
4. Narrative Summary.

Characterization will see you learning how to use back-story to determine how characters will react in any given situation. Dialogue will show you how to write speech that creates a narrative space between the reader and your characters. Description will demonstrate the best way to describe events, and narrative summary will give you guidelines as to what you can and can't have the narrator saying to the reader.

[Chapter 2: Characterization >>](#)

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Characterization

The aim of this section is to show how you can use back-story to dictate the way your character's act in any given situation. The more complex your back-story, the more realistic your characters and the more likely your readers are to fully engage with your novel.

The logical place to begin is with your novel's characters. The fundamental principle behind the Show, Don't Tell Methodology is that a story is told via actions and dialogue. The role of the narrator is to provide description, not explanation. The ultimate aim is for the story to happen inside a reader's mind, not on the page of the book. Only by lifting the story off the page and into the reader's mind will the reader remain engaged and interested.

Yet, there a deeper principle is at work.

It is the understanding that emotionally truthful characters are defined by a reader's interpretation of their words and actions, NOT by a narrator's guidance. This is a wordy sentence, but we've already touched on this concept. Let me

explain a little. When you write characters that act and speak in a way that is true to real emotion (fear, happiness etc.), it is the meaning the reader gives to these words and actions that matter, not what the narrator TELLS the reader to think and feel.

It is the understanding that any story is capable of stirring deep, universal emotions within the reader.

In other words, it is the writer's job to SHOW the reader what the characters are doing via actions and dialogue. The writer must not TELL the reader the reasons behind the words and actions via narrative summary.

So how does this principle apply to characters?

Again, we are faced with a situation in which complex theory is actually applied via simple writing technique. To discover this technique we must first delve a little deeper into characters.

All major characters within a novel will consist of three essential components:

- 1.Internal voice.
- 2.External voice.

3.Actions.

Internal voice is the 'sound track' within a character's mind. This is their combination of beliefs, experience and upbringing. This is the moral compass (or lack of) that will influence the way they interact within the physical world.

External voice is simply the words that come out of a character's mouth. Actions are just that, actions. This is the way in which a character will react to an event. The magic comes when we bring all three elements together.

It is the difference between a character's internal dialogue, their external dialogue and their actions, which breathes life into your story. In short, real people say one thing and do another.

Internal Voice

All characters (and real people for that matter) have a set of unspoken beliefs, which are a combination of all their life experiences. This is the voice inside their head that not only provides a constant dialogue, but will also 'influence' a

character's reaction in any given situation. These 'thoughts' are unconscious.

For example...

Perhaps your main character was brought up in a family environment that teaches them Chinese people were dishonest and could not be trusted. As your character has grown, they may have gone on to intellectually understand that this belief is wrong, but it is ingrained and lies dormant. This latent racist attitude makes up part of the character's internal voice. They may be consciously aware that this view is racist. They may even consider themselves not to be a racist. In fact, in everyday life they probably say and do things that demonstrate to the world that they are not, in fact, racist. However, in any given situation, involving interaction with a Chinese person, the character will be influenced, subconsciously, by their internal voice. The character would, probably, not say, 'I distrust Chinese people'. However, they would interact in a way, perhaps subtly (or not so subtly), different from a character that did not hold the same beliefs.

You can see here how the back-story for this character can have them saying and believing they are not racist, but when confronted by a situation with Chinese people, they can act in a way that shows them to be racist.

You say one thing and do another.

All of the characters in your book need a well-defined internal voice. You must map out the key influences on your characters. Therefore, the starting point to creating an internal voice for your characters is to create a character's back-story. The back-story is the character's life history. It is a summary of all the key events and modes of thought, which influence them in a major way. In its simplest form, this is a list of beliefs the character holds, and, perhaps, the events that created these beliefs. Only by understanding a character's background can a writer then begin to develop the character's internal voice. The more complex the writer's understanding of a character's background, the more realistically can they invent the character's personality.

This process can be very daunting for a writer, but it is important to understand that characters don't need to appear

fully formed in your mind. Many experienced writers will start the writing process by jotting down a few notes about a character and their major influences. They will decide on the character's main views on the world and build a broad picture of the character. Some writers like to find photos and images to represent the character. Some think of real people.

Ultimately, the end goal is always the same, to try and get 'inside the head' of the character. As the story develops writers will elaborate and expand on this picture. They will add in smaller details, allowing the character to grow and breathe.

This 'character profile' is an essential part of the writing process but here's the big secret... it's a secret. The character profile is created for your eyes only. It is NOT part of the novel.

Once you have spent time and effort in creating a character profile you will face temptation. It must be overcome. Under no circumstances can you share the character profile with your writer.

You will feel the temptation to TELL the reader the character's internal thought process and back-story. You will want to explain to the reader why a character is acting in a certain way.

Let's face it, you'll want to show off and TELL the reader why your writing is so clever.

If you do - YOU LOSE!

You must resist... At no point should the internal voice of your character spill out onto the page. The internal voice is for you and your character. It is a secret that must not be shared.

YOU, the writer, must understand the reasoning behind every word and action of your characters, but you must never explain this reasoning to the reader.

The ultimate goal is to create a space between the character and the reader. You want your characters to speak and act in a way that is both truthful and logical, but never explained by the narrator. It is in this space that the reader will fill in his or her own understanding of the character. They will, instinctively, search to understand the character. (Remember

what was said in the opening sections. Your brain is trained to give meaning to words and actions, it just can't resist.)

This forces the reader to engage, to become part of the story.

As their understanding of your characters grows, via their words and actions, the reader will start to gain a deeper meaning. It is this deeper, emotional truth, which will lift your novel to the next level.

The internal voice is the writer's secret weapon. It is the tool that you will use to bring the character to life.

It's your Dr. Frankenstein's bolt of lightning.

Yet the space you create between actions and meaning is dark and fragile. By exposing this internal voice to the light of the narrative, the magic is broken. As soon as a reader is TOLD how a character acts, the reader is pushed onto the back foot. They no longer need to work it out. They no longer need to fill in the gaps. Their brains can shut down.

Each time you TELL the reader a character is happy or sad, rather than SHOW via actions, the reader disengages a little more.

Each time you TELL the reader a nugget of the back-story via the narrator, and not in dialogue, the reader is pushed away.

Each time you give into temptation and explain, the reader starts to turn off.

If a narrator is explaining the internal voice then the reader is instantly passive. They are left in a position where they no longer need to 'lean into' the story. They can sit back and let the story come to them. This reduces the space between the character and the reader, and no room is left for the reader's mind to create its magic.

External Voice

We've seen that internal voice is a character's thought pattern, the internal beliefs that drive a character's words and actions. External voice is less complex and is simply the words a character speaks.

However, it is not quite that simple.

The Show, Don't Tell Methodology is a process in which a writer removes the 'story' from narrative summary and, instead, tells the story via words and actions. It is worth a mention that I

am not suggesting that writers stop using narrative summary. I am not even suggesting that writers stop putting character's thoughts in the narrative summary, all I am saying is that a writer must use the narrative summary with care and consideration. Since no back-story can be dumped into the narrative, dialogue is suddenly very important. It is the only way in which you can pass the plot and back-story to the reader.

External voice, or dialogue, now becomes a writer's most important tool.

So... how do you know what a character will say in any given situation?

To understand the best way to write dialogue you must start to see conversation in a new light. You must see dialogue as an exchange between characters with a clearly defined purpose. However, it remains important that dialogue has a realistic feel. You need to be writing conversation that could have actually happened.

In essence, dialogue is as a string of interactions.

One character says something, another character reacts... and so on.

'Hello,' John said. [Action]

'Hi,' Bill said. [Reaction]

Sometimes you will have a character choose to not react verbally or they may react physically. This is all part of the action/reaction sequence.

'Hello,' John said. [Action]

Bill stared at John. [Reaction]

Or...

'Hello,' John said. [Action]

Bill smiled and waved. [Reaction]

Once you have set up your characters in an action/reaction sequence, your next job is to decide what they will say.

There are actually three types of dialogue:

1. Dialogue that makes sense for the scene.
2. Dialogue that moves the plot forward.
3. Dialogue that fills in back-story.

Let's consider these in order.

The first is what makes sense for the scene. This is the natural speech pattern of the character in reaction to the events in the current scene.

For example, if a character is introduced to a person they have never met and the person says, 'Hello', then your character will reply with an appropriate comment, probably, 'Hello'.

This is also dialogue that is reaction to an event in the scene. For example, if the scene sees the main character buying a present for his wife. His wife would react when she is given the present.

The second type of dialogue is what needs to be said for the plot. Since you are unable to move the plot forward via narrative summary, you must use events and conversation to tell your story. This means that, at times, you will need certain characters to say things to move the plot forward.

For example, let's say you need to establish that your main character, let's call him John, again, has a sister. This is an important plot point. You can just have the narrator TELL the

reader that John has a sister. You will need to add this into the dialogue.

The dialogue could go something like this:

John stood in the car park of the pub. It was dark and the sky promised rain. A taxi pulled into the car park and made a circuit before coming to a stop in front of John. The driver let the window down, his dark skin and black hair visible in the dashboard lights.

'You order a taxi?' His voice tinged with an oriental accent.

'No,' John said.

The driver shrugged and fumbled with his radio speaking into it in a language John didn't understand. A voice on the other end responded, too muffled for John to hear. The driver leaned over again.

'You sure mate?'

'Yeah,' John said.

'Ahh...' the driver said. 'Do you want a lift anyway?'

'Thanks, I am waiting for my sister.'

'Ok,' the taxi driver said and pulled out of the car park.

The key here is that the plot point (John has a sister) has been passed to the reader in a realistic manner. This is a

conversation that could have actually happened. The result is that the reader is SHOWN that John has a sister.

The final type of dialogue is what needs to be said for the back-story. Since we are unable to pass back-story via the narrative, dialogue is the only outlet. We have seen that a character's back-story is not just events important to the plot (e.g. John has a sister), but also ideals and beliefs that may influence the way a character speaks (e.g. John is scared of dogs). Both of these elements will have an impact on the dialogue between your characters. However, since dialogue needs to be realistic in nature, this is not always that easy.

If you just have a character start talking about something that does not fit naturally in a scene, then the reader will smell a rat. They will see what you are doing and the magic is broken.

One of the challenges that you face is to create credible scenes to pass back-story to the reader via dialogue. This is, actually, a more common problem than you think. One reason that many detective stories feature a sidekick is to allow the main character to 'discuss' the case without any additional content. Think about it, the writer needs to pass a vital bit of back-

story, what better way than to have the sidekick tell the main character about a nearly missed anomaly picked up in an autopsy.

The pragmatic reality is that you will find yourself writing scenes with the sole purpose of passing back-story. Old friends from the past will show up just so you have an excuse to talk about the main character's tough childhood and alcoholic mother, dinner parties will pop up so you can talk about a piece of new government legislation that is relevant to the plot or cars will breakdown just so a character can talk about the mechanical skills he learned in the army.

For example, imagine you needed to let the reader know that your main character had attended university. You would not drop this into the narration; instead you would include the fact in the dialogue of a scene. However, this is not easy. Think about your own life. How many situations can you think of where you would talk about your education? I am guessing not that many. This probably means that you will need to write a scene just to pass the back-story. Perhaps, your character meets an old university friend for coffee. This would then give you the

perfect excuse to write a scene with the freedom to say just about anything you wished about the university days, but via dialogue.

Having mastered the concept of using dialogue to not only build a plot, but also pass back-story, there's one additional concept to consider, and that is the influence of the internal voice.

As we have established the internal voice is the beliefs and thought process of the main character. It is the sub-conscious thinking, which influences all the nuances of your character's life. It will also dictate how they speak and how they react to certain situations. For example, a character scared of dogs, who is asked to take a friend's dog for a walk, will react differently to a character who loves dogs.

When writing any dialogue, be it to fit in a scene, move forward the plot or pass back-story, you must always consider the roll the character's internal voice will play on the words that they actually say. A character's internal voice will influence how characters react and the types of words and phrases they use.

In the example we gave when discussing internal voice, we suggested the main character's internal voice was telling them to distrust Chinese people. We have suggested that this may be a subtle influence, one of which the character is unaware. Remember, we are not saying the character is a racist, but holds a slightly skewed view.

Let's go back to the taxi scene and re-write it with this internal latent racism in mind. It might go something like this...

John stood in the car park of the pub. It was dark and the sky promised rain. A taxi pulled into the car park and made a circuit before coming to a stop in front of John. The driver let the window down, his dark skin and black hair visible in the dashboard lights.

'You order a taxi?' His voice was tinged with an oriental accent.

'No,' John said, shuffling back from the car.

The driver shrugged and fumbled with his radio speaking into it in a language John didn't understand. A voice on the other end responded, too muffled for John to hear. The driver leaned over again.

'You sure mate?'

'Yeah,' John said. 'I am sure.'

'Ahh...' the driver said. 'Do you want a lift anyway?'

'Aren't you supposed to only pick up planned fares?' There was a pause.

'It doesn't mater. I am waiting for my sister, she'll be hear any moment.'

'Ok,' the taxi driver said and pulled out of the car park. John watched the car leave, making a mental note of the number plate.

Here we have added a physical action with him moving back from the car. We have also added verbal reaction with him questioning the driver's right to pick up a passenger. Finally, we have John noting the number plate. These small changes play no part in the over all plot. However, what they do is add 'texture' to the character. In this situation, the reader will probably pick up on the subtle behaviour of the character. The reader's brain will instinctively try to work out why the character is acting in the way they are, and start to build their own story about the character.

The words and actions are triggers for the reader. They create a space between the reader and the character, and force the reader to dive into that space as they contemplate why he would react in that way. The character may say he's not a racist, and

may even believe this to be true, but his words and actions in this scene suggest otherwise. This paradox excites the reader. The reader is pulled into the story and forced to engage. They are becoming an active part as they try to understand the character and the way he reacts.

Actions

As we have seen, The Show, Don't Tell Methodology means that you are unable to rely on narrative summary to tell their story. Instead, you must look for other, more engaging, ways to connect with the reader. In the last section we saw that dialogue was one piece of this jigsaw, in this section we turn our attention to how you can use actions to help build engagement.

The granular structure of any novel is simple:

Events occur, characters react to the events.

However, how a character reacts to any given event can be as much a clue to their back-story as any dialogue.

The way in which a character acts is based on three things:

1.Common sense.

2.The plot.

3.The character's internal voice (which will reflect back-story).

This is a same pattern as the approach we took with the dialogue. Some events will demand a common sense response. For example - the phone rings, your character answers the phone. Other events will be part of the plot. For example, the killer starts to run away; your main character chases him. However, sometimes, the reaction will be based on the internal voice. For example, a dog barks, the character jumps.

Let me give you a more detailed example...

If we cycle back to John, we are now starting to build a profile for the character. We know he is afraid of dogs, and why. We also know he was brought up to mistrust Chinese people and this is showing in the way he speaks. We saw this in a past example when John's internal voice influenced the way he reacted to the taxi driver. In this example, we will mess with John a bit more by introducing a dog.

Here's the basic scene, with no internal influence:

John walked along the street. It was late afternoon and with most people at work, and kids at school, the suburban landscape was deserted. John shivered in the cold, biting wind, pulling the zip of his coat all the way up to his chin. Ahead of John, perhaps twenty paces, a large black, mangy looking dog stepped from between two parked cars. John walked on, looking left and right for a possible owner. As the dog passed they exchanged a brief look. John walked on in one direction, the dog in the other.

So, the event is a dog appearing from between two parked cars.

John's reaction is, well, minimal.

Now... let's rewrite the scene but with John's internal voice in play. We know John is scared of dogs and therefore his reaction will be different:

John walked along the street. It was late afternoon and with most people at work, and kids at school, the suburban landscape was deserted. John shivered in the cold, biting wind, pulling the zip of his coat all the way up to his chin. Ahead of John, perhaps about twenty paces, a large black, mangy looking dog stepped from between two parked cars. John stopped. He took a small step backwards before looking up and down the street. There was no traffic. The dog seemed to ignore John, padding in

his direction. John strode across the road, leaving the dog to pace its own way in the opposite direction, on the opposite side of the street.

In this example we are SHOWING the reader that John is scared of dogs. There's no narrative mention (or explanation) of this fear, instead it is reflected in John's reaction.

John is acting in the way that someone who is scared of dogs will react. The reader's brain, which is programmed to see meaning in actions, will try to work out why John has acted the way that he has. The reader's brain will give John's actions a meaning. However, at this point the reader doesn't have enough information to complete the picture. They will however, become engaged as they 'lean into' John's character.

The important aspect of this approach is that John's reaction leaves the reader with a small clue about John's past. The reader now knows that John has reacted to the presence of a dog. This may be part of a bigger jigsaw that is left for the reader to piece together; it may be a critical plot point or may simply be the writer adding texture to the story. It doesn't really matter from a technical viewpoint, since John is now a more realistic character.

Once again, by not explaining, via the narrator, we are creating a distance between the reader and the characters. They can see how John is reacting and are forced to 'lean into' the story. They must engage with John and start to build their own explanations. This is engagement and if done consistently will stop your reader becoming bored.

So must every splash of action contain influence from the internal voice?

The answer is well... yes, well... kind of.

Most action within a scene will be pretty straightforward. When deciding on how a character reacts to an event the first thing to do is decide what the common sense reaction would be. Having decided that, you need to work out if the reaction needs to differ, in order to fulfill the plot. Finally, having decided what the character should do, you now need to decide if the action is influenced, in any way, by their internal voice.

Therefore, the question to ask yourself, when writing any scene, is 'how would the character react?'

The answer to this question will often take your character on a wonderful journey. You will find them doing things that are unexpected and exciting. They will surprise you... and the reader. Yet, most importantly, when writing with honesty your characters will come alive, not on the pages of your book, but in the mind of your readers.

Making it all Work

We've now looked at the role of internal voice, dialogue and actions in helping your reader to engage with your story. Let's go back to our mate John and demonstrate how all three principles can be used in a short scene.

The fundamental concept of the Show, Don't Tell Methodology is that a writer must keep back-story and plot out of the narration. As I have driven home, including back-story in narration leaves the reader on the back foot and results in them becoming bored. Show, Don't Tell solves this problem by forcing the reader to 'lean into' the book and work for the plot. This produces interest, keeps the reader active and sucks them into the book.

By not using narration to pass back-story, the writer is forced to look to other methods to tell the story. This is where characterization comes into play.

As discussed a writer has three aspects to any character:

- 1.Their internal voice.
- 2.Their external voice.
- 3.Their actions.

The internal voice is the writer's secret weapon and is the way the character thinks about the world. The external voice is the character's conversation and can be used to pass back-story and plot. Finally, the way a character reacts to any given situation provides a subtle, though powerful, method to providing reader's with clues about the character's back-story.

The use of internal voice, external voice and actions is often called characterization.

There is one final aspect of characterization we are yet to address. You will often hear readers talking about 'three dimensional characters'. This is one of those terms that has no real, definable meaning. Readers (and reviewers) who talk about

'three dimensional characters' will often mean characters that are realistic or true to life. The problem you face is that you are telling a story, not writing a documentary. By their very nature characters in a novel are not real people. The goal of a novel is to stimulate emotion in readers and to tap into some deeper truth. This is done with characters that mimic the real world in a way that tricks the reader's brain into believing they are real.

Luckily, you can use the characterization methodology set out in this book to create 'realistic' characters.

How often have you heard a person say one thing, but then act in a completely different way?

Or, how often have you heard a person say something; believe it fully, but then act in a way that contradicts?

Or how often have you said one thing, believed it to be true and then found yourself acting in a way that contradicts your earlier statement?

The simple answer is that people often say and act in ways that are opposed. That's what makes people, people.

This is also what makes your character three-dimensional! It means that if you are going to create realistic characters they need to think, speak and act in ways that is, at times, contradictory.

The good news (actually it is brilliant news) is that you already have the tool sin place to do this with little additional effort. You are going to use your character's back-story to create situations in which your characters react in a unexpected, though logical (if only to you) manner.

Let's go back to John for an example:

John walked into the cramped three-bedroom house carrying a large cardboard box with a massive pink ribbon bowed at the top. He found his sister leaning on the doorframe of the open back door, the final drags of a cigarette in her hand. When she saw John, she flicked the cigarette butt into the garden, and then turned to him, her face beaming with a smile.

"John. Is that for me?" she said nodding at the box. John smiled back, pushing the box onto the kitchen table, its awkward weight evident.

"I don't see any other birthday girls about, do you?" John looked about in an exaggerated motion before leaning in and kissing his sister on the cheek.

"You'd better open it quick, its not the kind of present that likes to be kept waiting."

She danced from foot-to-foot as she tugged at the pink ribbon. As soon as the ribbon fell away the box lid forced its own way open with an explosion of black fur, ears, eyes and nose. John's sister scooped up the dog.

'A puppy. I love him.'

So John's bought his sister a dog. Really? What's going on! We know John hates dogs, so this makes no sense. John's acting irrationally.

Or is he?

Well... It is all a matter of viewpoint.

Remember, this is an example of characterization. The point here is that people do strange things. They often think/say one thing and do another. People do things that make no sense, it is what makes people, people. It is what will make your characters interesting and three-dimensional.

It is OK, in fact, desirable, that your characters do things that make no sense to the reader. That's the point. Though characters do things that make no sense to the reader, they

should make perfect sense to the writer. A character should surprise a reader, but they must never surprise the writer.

So here's a little secret about John and his sister, which you, the reader, don't know, because me, the writer, haven't told you...

When they were younger, John's sister had always wanted a dog, but because of John's fear it was never an option for the family. Fast forward. John's sister has just bought her first house and is setting up a new home. John had always felt guilty about the whole dog thing and now seemed the perfect time to make amends. John hates dogs, but he loves his sister more.

This is actually back-story. It was part of the character profile created for John. It therefore influences John's internal voice. John has two elements to his back-story that are relevant to this scene:

1. John hates dogs.

2. John loves his sister.

So... whilst John may talk and act in a way that is influenced by his hatred of dogs, he ALSO talks and acts in a way that is

influenced by his love for his sister. In this case John's love trumps his hate.

The result is that John's actions do make sense - to the writer. They, however, remain a mystery to the reader. The reader is forced to engage with John and build their own rationale for his actions.

The result? John is three-dimensional.

[Chapter 3: Engaging Your Reader >>](#)

Engaging Your Reader

In this chapter, we turn our attention to the just the simple technique we are going to use to keep readers enthralled in your book.

The first step is to delve a little more deeply into what a reader actually means when they say a book is 'boring'.

The answer is, actually, pretty simple.

A boring book is one that a reader fails to find interesting.

See, not really brain surgery. But let's put that differently, a boring book is one in which the reader fails to engage.

The idea of engagement is essential, so I want to reinforce its meaning in this context. Engagement is when a reading is emotionally invested in a book. Remember that feeling when you can't wait to get back to a novel you are reading? Yeah? Well, that's engagement. What about the feeling of shock when a character you love is killed off? We are all looking at you J.K. Well, you've guessed it, that's also engagement.

Sorry, we are on the verge of jargon here, so let's delve a little deeper before it all gets out of hand.

A reader that is engaged in your book is active.

A reader that is not engaged in your book (thinks it boring) is passive.

The best way to explain the concept of 'active reading' is with an example.

Let's say you are writing a novel about a petty criminal, let's call him John. As the main character of your book, John will

have a detailed back-story. One of the key elements of this back-story is that John is scared of dogs. The fear of dogs will play an important part in the climax of the story and is, therefore, an important plot point.

The reader needs to know about John's dog fear. The question is - how do you show the reader that John is scared of dogs?

You have two choices.

One will leave the reader actively engaged; the other will produce a passive, bored reader.

The first option (the easiest) is to 'dump' the back-story via the narrator. This is the process of using the narrator to TELL the reader about the back-story.

You could write this into the first chapter of your book:

'John had always been scared of dogs. Just the sound of a distant bark would bring him out in a cold sweat. His mother had always insisted this fear had sprung from an incident when he was just a baby. Apparently, a large black Labrador had jumped into John's pram, nipping his hand whilst snatching a melting ice cream. John wasn't one for psychology. He just knew he hated dogs.'

Seems OK, right?

Here, the narrator is TELLING the reader about John's fear of dogs. You have now ticked the box entitled 'tell reader John is scared of dogs' and you are now free to write the more exciting scenes. The problem is that this approach leaves the reader in a passive stance. They simply have to 'sit back' as the narrator spoon-feeds the key elements of the plot. The reader is not required to do any work. They are just given the information. They don't have to piece together any clues, or interpret any actions, or even read between the lines to see what a section of dialogue is really about. It is all there, no confusion.

Not convinced?

Well it may seem fine for this one example, but imagine a whole book of this back-story 'dumping'. Each time the writer needs to TELL the reader about an important plot point, they just dump it into the narrative and tick off the box. This way each plot point, and back-story element, is spoon fed to the reader, who sit back and lets it happen. It quickly becomes, well... boring.

YAWN...

So, if we can't 'dump' the back-story, what's the option? The second choice is to actively engage the reader. This requires more work, more skill, more thought, but the rewards are astounding. With this approach, the writer doesn't TELL the reader that John is scared of dogs, instead the writer SHOWS the reader by leaving clues. You must force the reader to work for the plot, sifting the story to find the plot elements that are important.

So what do you do?

Let's go back to our mate John. If you remember John's fear of dogs is a major plot point and we need to let the reader know. At first, there's no need to write a new scene. Just begin by taking a scene from the start of the book and adding in a description of a passing dog. Nothing spectacular, just a dog on the street, blink and you'll miss it.

John, of course, sees the dog and acts. You don't write in any new dialogue, just a few lines of description where John sees the animal and crosses the street to avoid the dog. It is essential that the narrator describes the action but offers no

explanation. The narrator must not TELL the reader why John is acting in the way that is described.

Now, let's jump forward. Imagine there's a scene, at a key point in the book, in which John, having just committed a crime, is running from the police. John knows a short cut down an alley. He turns into the alley and sees a dog. John stops in his tracks, turns around, and chooses to take a different route. He is nearly caught in the process.

Again, this is action only. The narrator must not TELL the reader why John is acting, just a description of his actions. Nothing is said about the dog, beyond a description of John's actions. John sees the dog and reacts. It is up to the reader to draw his or her own conclusions.

Finally, you write a new scene. In this, John and his partner in crime are in a car. John sees a dog in the nearby park. He looks at the dog and shakes his head, muttering under his breath. His partner asks, "What is it with you and dogs?" And you are off... Now you can write a conversation (it must be via dialogue), in which John talks about his hatred of dogs.

Perhaps he relates the 'ice-cream-in-the-pram' story, it is up

to you. You already have the back-story in your head (the writer), how much of this you give to the reader is your choice. What is essential is that the reader learns of John's fear via conversation, NOT the narrator.

What you are doing here is writing a scene in which you can present dialogue that passes the back-story in a convincing manner. John's friend has seen John's reaction to dogs, it would only be natural for it to pop in conversation. This conversation then becomes a vehicle for you to present back-story.

I would like to go one step further.

It would be perfectly acceptable for you, the writer, to never explain John's fear of dogs to the reader. You could remove completely the conversation and just have John reacting to dogs. The important aspect is that you, the writer, understands John's fear and how he will react in any given situation.

Have you ever seen the Indiana Jones series of films? In these, Indy often encounters snakes. In RAIDERS OF THE LOST ARK there is even this exchange:

Indiana: There's a big snake in the plane, Jock!

Jock: Oh, that's just my pet snake Reggie.

Indiana: I hate snakes, Jock! I hate 'em!

Jock: Come on! Show a little backbone, will ya!

The viewer is never given a reason for the Indy's fear of snakes. Does the writer, George Lucas, know the reason?

Perhaps. Does it matter that the reader is never told?

Absolutely not, Indy's fear, is just a tool to humanize the character and help the viewer to engage. As part of Indy's back-story it helps the writer to predict how Indy will react in a situation that involves snakes.

The only thing you must NOT do is to have the narrator explain the back-story via narrative summary.

Wow... than that's an import little statement.

For all of this to work, you are relying on one trick of the brain. In day-to-day life we see people acting and hear people speaking, but we have no explanation for their reasons or motivations. Our brain has become very good at seeing meaning in words and actions. At the most basic level, if a man looks

angry, is carrying a big stick and running towards us shouting, 'Die', then our brain must work out what is going on pretty fast.

This means that whenever your brain sees an event or hears words of conversation it will automatically try to work out the meaning behind the words and actions. This is where the magic happens. It is this action of the brain that you, as a writer, are trying to harness.

If you can write event in which people act convincing but don't explain why, your brain will do the rest and add in a meaning. The same goes for conversation. Your brain will naturally look for a meaning between the lines. So if you write truthfully (as in true to the nature of people), your brain will see deeper meaning. That's why when John runs from the dog, your brain is trying to work out why.

Another way to think of this is that you are trying to create a distance between the reader and the character.

By not explaining why John is scared of the dog, the reader is forced to fill in the blanks. Perhaps the reader is also scared of dogs and overlays their own fear. Even if they are not

scared of dogs, we are all scared of something. Your brain recognizes fear when it sees it! There is something in all of our lives that will, metaphorically, make us cross the street. After all, fear is the deepest of human emotions.

So... here's the next level. By forcing the reader to recognize fear and look for that emotion in their own memory banks, we are triggering a deeper truth than we can ever express in words. The reader sees John's fear and actually, at some level, experiences fear.

The key point here is that by altering the way you write, by moving away from narrative summary and towards words and actions, you are forcing the reader from a passive stance into an active stance. When you write in a way that creates a narrative space between the reader and the characters, the reader will 'lean in' and engage with your book.

In the most simplistic terms:

Narrative summary (dumping back-story) = TELL.

Passing back-story via dialogue and actions = SHOW.

A word of warning here... You are going to learn to use Show, Don't Tell in a way that moves far beyond anything taught in a creative writing class. Writing in this manner is more than a simple technique, it is writing methodology. In fact, Show, Don't Tell will become your mantra. The application of this one simple phrase is the

key to unlocking your novel and creating active prose that sucks the reader into your story. You will find repeatedly that by simply asking, 'Am I SHOWING or TELLING?' you will lift your novel to the highest possible level.

The trick is now to forget the theory and to learn the simple techniques that will allow you to build the Show Don't Tell Methodology into the very fabric of your writing. It's this task that we will be addressing in the coming chapter.

To apply the Show, Don't Tell Methodology to a wider novel you will need to focus on four key aspects:

- Characterization.
- Dialogue.
- Description.

- Narrative Summary.

Characterization will see you learning how to use back-story to determine how characters will react in any given situation.

Dialogue will show you how to write speech that creates a narrative space between the reader and your characters.

Description will demonstrate the best way to description events, and Narrative Summary will give you guidelines as to what you can and can't have the narrator saying to the reader.

[Chapter 4: Dialogue >>](#)

Dialogue

We have seen in the previous chapter how you can use internal voice, external voice and actions to force your reader to engage in your novel. Since dialogue is now an essential part of the novel writing process, we will examine the subtler elements of using dialogue in more detail.

In this chapter, we will go one step further and look at dialogue in more detail.

- You will learn how to write dialogue that is crisp and realistic.
- You will also discover how to control your dialogue so the reader remains engaged, whilst fleshing out your character's personality.
- We will discover new techniques that will help you to stay on the Show, Don't Tell Methodology straight and narrow, learning tricks that will force you to kill TELL at conception.
- We will delve into the basic grammar of dialogue.
- Finally, we will consider thoughts and their role, if any, in the Show, Don't Tell Methodology.

Tagging Dialogue

When considering dialogue many writers will glaze over, or panic as memories of incomprehensible school lessons come flooding back. To help ease the pain we will start with one of the simplest, yet most powerful aspects of dialogue - tagging.

Tagging, or attribution, is the process of telling a writer who is speaking. For example:

'Hello,' John said.

The John said is the tag. This is also known as attribution.

The best way to consider tagging is with this one simple principle.

Tagging is about showing the reader who is speaking and that is all.

It is not about telling the reader HOW the person is speaking. This is a simple principle, but incredibly powerful.

Let's look at another example. In this example we are doing it wrong.

We are not only SHOWING the reader who is speaking, but also TELLING them how:

'Hello,' John growled.

In this example, John didn't say anything, he growled it.

So, why is it so wrong to tag speech in this way?

The simplest answer is that it looks amateurish. It's the kind of dialogue you see in a school kid's textbook or from a two-bit creative writing class. If you use this type of tagging you will be flagging yourself up as a writer with little confidence in your ability to SHOW emotion.

There is a more complex reason...

When you write, "John growled", you are TELLING the writer the way in which John is speaking. As we know TELLING is bad. It pushes the reader onto the back foot and forces them into a passive frame of

mind.

The alternative is to show them how the speaker is speaking. Rather than relying on tagging to TELL the reader, the writer must use the context and texture of the scene to SHOW the story. The words and actions that have come before the dialogue, will SHOW the reader John's frame of mind and will allow them to adjust the dialogue within their mind's eye.

So... what's the best practice when tagging dialogue?

The answer is use SAID.

Said is a magic word. Readers are so used to seeing it that they start to ignore the word. It becomes a punctuation mark.

There is a side effect to this approach. When tagging dialogue with said, you can get a lot of said Ping-Pong. Take this example:

'Hi,' John said.

'Hi,' Peter said.

'How are you doing?' John said.

'Good,' Peter said, 'you?'

'Good. Thanks for asking,' John said.

As you see we have lots of "John said" and "Peter said". There's actually a very simple solution. Just don't tag.

Readers aren't stupid. If there are just two people speaking in a scene, they don't need to be told time and again who is speaking. This means you can just ignore the attribution.

Here's the example from above, written with a bit of common sense:

'Hi,' John said.

'Hi,' Peter said.

'How you doing?'

'Good, you?'

'Good. Thanks for asking.'

This is the basics of writing dialogue and is the foundation from which you should build. There are also a couple of additional writing habits that will bring sparkle to your writing.

The first is to consider where to add the tag. The best place is at the end of the dialogue.

For example:

'Good. Thanks for asking,' John said.

Occasionally, you might want to spice it up, or simply produce a different tempo in a long section of dialogue. In this case, put the tag where it fits naturally.

For example:

'Good,' John said. 'Thanks for asking.'

However, there's one word of warning. When moving tagging from the end of the dialogue, don't put it at the start. It looks messy and marks you out as an amateur.

This example is just plain WRONG:

John said, 'Good. Thanks for asking.'

Clarity in your writing should always be your goal and with this in mind you should always stick with the attribution you set up in the first instance. If you start the scene saying "the boy said" don't switch half way through. The "boy" should not suddenly become "Peter." The thinking here is that in a real life conversation, you would not change the way to referred to a person mid-conversation, so why do it in your novel?

However, once you are out of a scene you can change, just not within a scene.

Another sign of amateur writing is the old 'said John' approach. This is considered by many in the know to be old fashioned and out dated. Therefore, 'John said' is the way forward. After all you would write 'he said', but would you write 'said he'?

Beats in Dialogue

When applying the Show, Don't Tell Methodology, which demands that writers stop using narrative summary to pass backstory and plot, you will find themselves naturally gravitating to dialogue. You will write more dialogue than ever before, and you will try to use this dialogue to divulge key plot elements and back-story.

This is natural.

Dialogue is the most powerful tool in the writer's tool kit. A well-written section of dialogue will push the plot forward and develop characters, whilst dragging the reader deeper into the novel.

However, this can create problems. The renewed reliance on dialogue means that writers will find themselves writing scenes, which contain much more dialogue than they would have in the past.

Long sections of dialogue, especially between two people can become daunting for a reader. The back-and-forth creates an almost hypnotic rhythm and the reader can begin to miss the nuances of your writing. This can be further exaggerated when applying the 'only-use-said' technique.

He said - she said - he said - she said - can soon become tiresome.

That's where beats come into play. 'What's a beat?' I hear you shout.

Here's a section of dialogue, which contains a beat:

"I don't see any other birthday girls about, do you?"

John looked about in an exaggerated motion before leaning in and kissing his sister on the cheek.

"You'd better open it quick, it's not the kind of present that likes to be kept waiting."

Now here's the same example without the beat:

"I don't see any other birthday girls about, do you? You'd better open it quick, it's not the kind of present that likes to be kept waiting."

See?

A beat is a section of action within dialogue. In the example above, John looks about and kisses his sister.

A beat dissects a section of dialogue, momentarily lifting the reader from the sequence. If used correctly, they will force the reader renew their attention to the conversation, as the dialogue is stopped and started.

Beats can be used for three distinct purposes:

1. To control pace.
2. A vehicle to add descriptions of people and places.
3. Place for characterization.

Let's look at these in order.

Controlling pace is pretty straightforward. Sections of dialogue can skip along at a right old pace. If two characters are exchanging short sentences, pages can whip by as the reader absorbs what is being said. The problem here is that you don't always want the pace to be fast. Perhaps you just want the reader to pay more attention, or you are trying to balance the wider pace of a scene. It might even be that you are separating two sections of action with a section of dialogue. For the action to have true impact it needs to be sandwiched with slower sections, the light and dark, so to speak. In these situations, beats are your friend.

The second reason for using beats is to add descriptions. Whenever a reader comes across a new location or character you should be adding descriptions. The problem is that you don't want to dump long paragraphs of flowery prose. Instead, you want just enough for them to paint a picture in their mind's eye. However, if you are dealing with a complex location or a major character, you will want to layer in additional description, a line or two at a time. This is where beats can be extremely useful. We will look at using beats for description in more detail in the next chapter.

The final reason is characterization. If you have developed a complex

character profile you will be well aware of a character's internal influences. You will know in any given situation how the internal voice will influence the external words and actions. Beats are a great way to show this.

Look at the example below. We have seen this before, but let's look at it with new eyes:

John stood in the car park of the pub. It was dark and the sky promised rain. A taxi pulled into the car park and made a circuit before coming to a stop in front of John.

The driver let the window down, his dark skin and black hair visible in the dashboard lights.

'You order a taxi?' His voice was tinged with an oriental accent.

'No,' John said, shuffling back slightly from the car.

The driver shrugged and fumbled with his radio speaking into it in a language John didn't understand. A voice on the other end responded, too muffled for John to hear. The driver leaned over again. 'You sure mate?'

'Yeah,' John said. 'I am sure.'

'Ahh...' the driver said. 'Do you want a lift anyway?'

'Aren't you supposed to only pick up planned fares?' There was a pause.

'It doesn't matter. I am waiting for my sister, she'll be here any moment.'

'Ok,' the driver said and pulled out of the car park. John watched the car leave, making a mental note of the number plate.

Here's the same example, with the beats highlighted and explained:

John stood in the car park of the pub. It was dark and the sky promised rain. A taxi pulled into the car park and made a circuit before coming to a stop in front of John. [This is description delivered via narrative summary]

The driver let the window down, his dark skin and black hair visible in the dashboard lights. [BEAT: This is a description prior to dialogue. The dark skin SHOWING the reader the driver is not white.] 'You order a taxi?' His voice was tinged with an oriental accent.

'No,' said John shuffling back slightly from the car. [BEAT: Internal voice says he mistrusts Chinese people, this is reflected in his actions.]

The driver shrugged and fumbled with his radio speaking into it in a language John didn't understand. A voice on the other end responded, too muffled for John to hear. The driver leaned over again. [BEAT: This is really a section of narrative summary, but since it dissects dialogue it is, technically, a beat] 'You sure mate?'

'Yeah,' John said. 'I am sure.'

'Ahh,' the driver said. 'Do you want a lift anyway?'

'Aren't you supposed to only pick up planned fares?' There was a pause.
[BEAT:Slows the pace. Also suggest John is considering his next actions.
It is up to the reader to decide what John is thinking.] 'It doesn't
matter. I am waiting for my sister, she'll be here any moment.'
'Ok,' the taxi said driver and pulled out of the car park. John watched
making a mental note of the number plate. [BEAT: John watches the car
and makes a note. This is his back-story at work, forcing John to think
the worst of the driver, who may be Chinese.]

The final thing to say about beats is for them not to be overused.
Long sections of dialogue are good. You do want to create a rhythm
and allow the reader to become comfortable with your writing style.
Yet, there's a balance. Too many beats and the dialogue drags, not
enough and it whips by. Ultimately, it is your choice.

Using Adverbs

Of all the principles and techniques that will improve your writing,
how you deal with adverbs is, perhaps the most powerful. In short,
the removal of adverbs will make you a better writer, forcing you to
avoid 'lazy writing' and, instead, develop a writing style that will
naturally engage your readers. In addition, the conscious removal of
adverbs will force you to SHOW. You will find that adverbs are most
commonly used in sections of TELL.

Let's start with identifying an adverb. Adverbs are words that modify verbs. A verb is a doing word (run, walk, fly etc.). Most adverbs end in -ly, so they are easy to spot. This might sound complicated but don't worry. Once you learn to spot an adverb, they'll jump out the page at you like dirty little trolls.

Here's an example:

He closed the door firmly.

Here "closed" is the verb and "firmly" is the adverb.

So what's so bad? You have a nice clear picture of the door being closed, well... firmly.

The problem is that by using adverbs you are TELLING the reader how the door is being closed. The reader isn't SHOWN and there's no room for interpretation. Remember TELL is bad, SHOW is good.

Let's now consider what happens if we remove the adverb:

He closed the door.

This doesn't tell us anything about how he closed the door. Surely this is worse? Well, actually the opposite is the case. When reading this sentence, which has no context, it makes no sense, but reading/writing is all about context.

What is essential to consider is what comes before and after the

adverb.

Looking back at our example of the closed door. If the paragraph before had described the door closer tiptoeing through a room, trying not to wake a baby, the closure of the door will mean one thing. However, if the paragraph before had described a moody teenager storming from a room after an argument, the closure is something else.

The power here is that the context and texture of your writing will SHOW the reader and allow them to fill in the gaps. The reader will decide HOW the door is closed. They will become part of the process. They will build a picture in their mind's eye, engaging with your words and becoming part of the story. Now that's powerful stuff.

Sorry, let me dwell on this a moment. What I am showing you here is a technique you can use that forces the reader to build the story in their own mind. It allows you to force the reader to fully engage with your work.

What's more, by ruthlessly removing adverbs you are forcing yourself to write in a way that SHOWS not TELLS. Each time you kill an adverb you must look at your prose with new eyes. You must ask yourself, 'Am I giving the reader enough for this to make sense?'

So far we have been talking about the use of adverbs in general

prose. If you are able to eliminate as many of these as possible, and then ensuring the context is in place for your verbs to make sense, you will be a better writer.

We now turn our attention to adverbs and dialogue tagging (attribution).

The rule with dialogue is simple:

Under no circumstances should you be using adverbs in relation to dialogue.

Never.

NEVER ever.

NEVER EVER EVER.

Adverbs used in dialogue will, beyond any other bad habit, mark you out as an amateur.

They are evil and must be destroyed.

Writers lacking in confidence, often find themselves falling into the habit of explaining a character's dialogue, and this makes sense.

Consider the situation. You have written a complex scene, you have thought carefully about a character's internal dialogue and how they will react. You want to make sure that this is not missed by the reader. So you explain your dialogue. Remember we talked about the

temptation to show the reader how clever you've been? Well this is another example.

For example, in this scene a mother asks her son about his homework. This is pretty simple. The son hates homework; the mother wants him to do it. It goes like this:

'Have you got any homework Paul?' Paul's mother asked harshly.

'Yeah, loads,' said Paul sadly.

'Well, you need to get it done before you can go out to play,' said Paul's mother firmly.

Welcome to amateur hour. It pains me just to write this prose. I think I need a shower.

The use of adverbs (harshly, sadly and firmly) marks the writer out as lacking in confidence. Worse still, they just don't work. TELLING never works. The reader will just turn off. For this scene to work the reader must be given the room to fill in the gaps themselves.

Let's look at the same example, but with the adverbs killed dead:

'Have you got any homework Paul?' asked Paul's mother.

'Yeah, loads,' said Paul.

'Well, you need to get it done before you can go out to play.'

No difference. The reader still gets the gist of the exchange. Also

notice that the final attribution to Paul's mother has been removed without the world exploding. It could be argued that in this example the reader is not aware that Paul's mother is annoyed with Paul and the homework is a constant touchstone for arguments, and I agree. Using SHOW you can't pass this type of information in a few words, but why would you want to?

Remember, context is everything. All the words that come before this fraction of dialogue will give the conversation context. If this is the third time Paul has had homework and the other two resulted in conflict, the reader will fill in the gaps. They will know what Paul and his mother feels (or think they know) and the reader will add weight to the words. This is engagement.

Still not convinced? Still think you need something extra? Ok, what about adding a beat?

'Have you got any homework Paul?' asked Paul's mother.

'Yeah, loads,' said Paul. He turned to look at his mother, a frown spread across his face.

'Well, you need to get it done before you can go out to play.'

Here, by adding "he turned to look at his mother, a frown spread across his face", we've added some context, giving a clue about Paul's internal voice. It's all about context and not adverbs.

Finally... adverbs are your friends in only one way. In fact, adverbs can be invaluable.

The reason?

If you have put an adverb in your writing then you are almost certainly TELLING not SHOWING.

Adverbs are TELL flags. Hunt them out, kill them and turn the TELL to SHOW.

Formatting Dialogue

Since dialogue now plays an essential role in your writing it is important that you can use it with ease. Formatting dialogue correctly can trip up even the most talented writer. From the outside it can appear that formatting dialogue is a black box of contradictory rules. Many writers shy away from the nitty gritty of writing and feel the grammar of speech is something an editor or proofreader should be fixing. They are wrong. The grammar of dialogue is the basic building block of your writing, if you have pride in your work then you should be getting it right. You also need to remove any barriers that are stopping you from writing dialogue.

On a pragmatic level, no one will care as much about your book as you. Yes, professional editors and proofreaders will fix errors, but

the more errors there are the more chance a few of the pesky buggers will slip through the editing net.

The best way to explain the rules of formatting dialogue is to use an example. There, we will illustrate the steps required to format the following section of dialogue:

Hi have you seen my cat said Bob. No said Bill I have no idea where your cat is. If you see my cat will you let me know questioned Bob looking sad. Of course replied Bill with a tone of concern.

The first rule is – new speaker, new line.

This is a pretty easy rule to apply. Each time a new speaker speaks you place the line of dialogue on a new line. This line should be indented.

We can see how this applies to our example:

Hi have you seen my cat said Bob.

No said Bill I have no idea where your cat is.

If you see my cat will you let me know questioned Bob looking sad.

Of course replied Bill with a tone of concern.

Our next rule says that all speech should be placed in speech marks.

These can be either single (') or double ("), it's your choice.

However, keep in mind that if you use, say single ('), you need to be

using the opposite, in this case double (") when you are reporting speech inside speech.

'Hi have you seen my cat' said Bob.

'No' said Bill 'I have no idea where your cat is.'

'If you see my cat will you let me know' questioned Bob looking sad.

'Of course' replied Bill with a tone of concern.

Now, it's time for punctuation.

When writing dialogue you will often use 'tags'. These are verbs that link the spoken words with the remainder of the sentence. Commonly used tags includes said, asked, replied and many more. Without going into the technical detail, to correctly punctuate spoken words and tags you must link them using a comma. If you use a full stop the sentences are broken and it no longer makes sense.

If we look at the second line of our example we see:

'No' said Bill

This is a single sentence and therefore must end with a full stop, giving us:

'No' said Bill.

The tag in this sentence is 'said' and this must be connected to the speech. If you added a full stop at the end of the spoken words, it

would separate the tag and become incorrect:

'No.' Said Bill. [WRONG]

Instead, we must link the spoken word and the tag with a comma, this gives us:

'No,' said Bill. [CORRECT]

If we apply this to the full example we get:

'Hi, have you seen my cat?' said Bob.

'No,' said Bill. 'I have no idea where your cat is.'

'If you see my cat will you let me know?' questioned Bob, looking sad.

'Of course,' replied Bill, with a tone of concern.

Please note that in the first and third lines we have used a ? instead of a , since it is a question.

[Chapter 5: Description >>](#)

Description

The Show, Don't Tell Methodology teaches us that we must remove all back-story, emotion and plot development from the narrative and, instead, present it in a way that engages the reader.

It is essential that the reader is never given back-story/emotion/plot but, instead, discovers it as they read. The first port of call in this process is the dialogue. After all, how better to pass back-story and plot, than from the mouths of your characters. However, emotion presents a new challenge.

You'll discover that the way the characters react, and how you describe this reaction, will help express emotion to your readers.

Painting a Picture

The famous writer Stephen King provides us with the perfect analogy for writing. In his book, On Writing, he describes writing as..

Telepathy, of course. It's amusing when you stop to think about it—for years people have argued about whether or not such a thing exists . . .

and all the time it's been right there, lying out in the open like Mr. Poe's Purloined Letter. All the arts depend upon telepathy to some degree, but I believe that writing offers the purest distillation.

So what is King saying?

The best way to think about writing is a process of transferring an image from your mind into the mind of the reader. As a writer, you conjure a mental picture of a scene – a location, populated by characters that say and do things. You can see the characters, the location and the action. It is crystal clear.

Your job is then to take this image and put it into the mind of the reader.

See... telepathy.

The problem you face is in taking the crystal clear image from your mind and transferring it to the reader's mind. This is where many inexperienced writers come unstuck. The instinctive approach is to describe the picture from your mind's eye in as much detail as possible. The theory being that the words on the page will conjure the same image in the mind of the reader.

And why not? This makes sense; the more detailed your description the better the image you produce... right?

Actually, this is a bit of a rookie mistake.

The result is that if your main character has blue eyes, the inexperienced writer will make them 'piercing blue' or 'an unusual shade of bright blue' or 'a shade of blue that would bring the angels from the heavens'.

The problem is that though the English language is pretty good at describing stuff, it is nowhere near as detailed as the mind of the reader. The reader's mind is stacked full of detailed images, which go far beyond any written description.

As soon as you try to pin down the description of an object, person or location, you are actually moving in the wrong direction.

The key here is the opposite of what you think.

Less is more.

What experienced writers know is that their job is not to describe an object/person/location in detail but, instead, to give the reader just ENOUGH description to get their mind engaged and working, just enough description to allow the reader to recall a stored image from his or her own mind.

As a writer you are not trying to transfer the exact image in your mind but, instead, get the reader's mind to build its own picture.

Let's go back to those blue eyes.

What's wrong with just saying they are blue?

What happens when you say 'blue' is that you leave a gap. The reader's mind needs more than blue. The result is that the reader's mind jumps to fill in the gap. It uses its own library of images, all intensely detailed, to conjure a suitable set of blue eyes. This set of blue eyes will go far beyond anything you could have described.

Take this example:

The old man knocked on the door.

I am betting you have already formed a picture in your mind's eye. It is probably a vivid picture of an old man knocking on a door. The fact that your picture and my picture are different is not important. All that matters is that you have an old man and a door.

Now, try this:

The old man knocked on the blue door.

Another layer of detail forces you to reassess and reform your picture. Now the door is blue. The shade of blue and the old man will be different for each reader, but who cares?

Now this:

The old man knocked on the battered blue door.

Again, another picture. The door has changed. The words have forced

your mind to add in detail that was not there with the previous sentence.

What about this:

The old man knocked on the battered blue door. The ancient paint was peeling in large strips, the bare rotten wood clearly visible beneath.

Once again, you are forced to re-imagine your image of the old man and the door. Your mind will have focused in further, adding more layers.

But which is best?

The answer is it all depends on the scene.

If your scene calls for any old man to be knocking on any door, with neither the man nor the door having any real relevance to the plot, then the first example is the best. It allows the reader to paint a picture without any limitations. You give the reader just enough to paint the picture, but not so much that you are manipulating the image. However, let's say that the door being old is important. In fact, the age of the door is a key plot point. Perhaps this is a portal to another dimension. The door shows its true age not the age of the building. In this situation you would want to add in more detail. You might find that 'battered' is enough, though perhaps the 'peeling' paint is inadequate.

The important concept here is that the plot and context will dictate the amount of description that is required.

In short, enough is enough.

Types of Description

Not all description is created equal. The Show, Don't Tell Methodology dictates that the role of the narrative is simply to paint a picture of the world for the reader. The narrator is not there to pass back-story or move the plot forward. Their job is describing stuff that's happening. Well, that's a little white lie, the narrator can also pass the thoughts of characters, but we'll get to that in a later chapter. In other words, the only thing the narrator will be doing is describing the world in which the characters exist.

This is a really important point, so much so I'll say it again.

The only thing that should be in your narrative is description. No internal voice (well perhaps a bit of thought), but certainly NO BACK-STORY.

Narration is for description only (and some thoughts).

With that clear, it is important that you are able to clearly define the types of description you are using in your novel.

The four types are:

1. Location description is the description of places.

Remember, you are trying to paint a picture in the mind of the reader. This means that all locations require some level of description. This can vary from the interior of a car, to a simple room to a vast alien landscape.

2. Character description is simply what characters look like.

Not all characters will need detailed descriptions, but you will need to give every character enough description for your reader to form a mental image.

3. Action description is the words you use to describe what your characters are doing. This might be dialing a number on a phone or flying plane. The context of the action will dictate the level of description required.

4. Emotion description is probably the only one of the four that raises an eyebrow. In the Show, Don't Tell Methodology we must avoid telling readers the way a character is feeling. This means we can't say, 'John was sad.' Instead, we must describe John being sad, hence emotion description. This is the big one!

Location Description

It is essential that as your reader progresses through the world you

create, they are able to consistently create a mental image of the scenes you are describing. The reader will be constantly painting a mental picture of the scenes you describe; it is, therefore, essential you provide enough detail for them to paint a clear picture.

This is important. At all times your reader will be creating an image in their mind. They will create this image independent of your input. They will be desperately scrabbling for clues about the world your characters occupy and putting them together to create an image. It is up to you to control this image with your description.

You will need to constantly 'top up' the description of your locations and characters, so the reader is able to constantly recreate an accurate picture. This concept produces a simple rule - if the location changes, you need new description.

The problem that arises is often not to do with the timing of the description, but the amount of description that is needed, which will vary from a simple 'the bare room' to paragraphs of detailed prose.

OK... this is not as complex as it sounds. To help you understand, here are the two situations in which you will need to add description:

1. If a character enters a new location.
2. The location physically changes (it may start raining or a

train may pull up to a station platform).

In short, change needs description.

Let's look at some common examples:

If a character is in a new location then you need to add a description of that location. If a character moves from A to B, you must describe B. If you fail to describe a new location the reader loses the mental picture and quickly becomes confused. For example, if your main character was sitting in a dining room, but then gets up and moves to the kitchen, you would need to add description of the kitchen.

The question is how much description? The answer depends on the importance of the location. This is the key concept to description. The importance of the location dictates the amount of description.

- If the location is important then you need to include a significant amount of description.
- If the location is trivial, then the description will be minimal.

This means that you can be varying between paragraphs of description and simple phrases, such as 'the woods'. It all depends on context. What you choose to class as 'important' and 'trivial' is up to you.

Let me pause a moment. I can give you a better framework than 'it is up to you'. Here's a few "rules of thumb":

- If more than one scene occurs in a location, then that location is important.
- If only one scene occurs in a location but that scene is either essential to the plot, or the location itself is an important element (e.g. edge of a cliff for a fight scene), then the location is important.
- If one scene occurs in a location and the location is not relevant to the scene (it could be any old street) then the location is trivial.
- If the scene is a "travelling scene", that is getting a character from one location to another (think inside of a plane), then the location is trivial.

Let's first look at the level of description for an important location.

For example, if you are writing a story about a man stuck in a prison cell, then the cell is an important location (there will be more than one scene in this location, plus the cell is an important part of the scene) and will need a chunk of description, probably a couple of paragraphs. There will be a number of scenes set in this location and

it is, therefore, an important backdrop for your story.

How you present this description will also depend on the context of the location. If the location is important, but will only contain a scene or two, then you will get away with dumping the description into one or two paragraphs. However, if the location is important, AND will be the location for multiple scenes then you are going to want to have a far more detailed description. However, you will not want to dump a massive section of description and, therefore, you'll be spreading it out over a number of pages.

This leaves you with two choices:

1. Add all the description in one go.
2. Spread it out.

This isn't really an and/or choice. The story will help you decide.

Let's look in a little more detail.

If the location is a one off, in other words, if the location will be used in just one scene, then add the description at the start of the scene in one chunk.

If the location will be used in more than one scene, then you need to take a different approach. In this situation, you start with a significant description, probably a single paragraph. Then, as the scenes progress you layer in more description, a line at a time.

Let's go back to our prison cell...

Our main character has been captured and placed in a cell. He will escape at the end of the scene and that's the last the reader will see of the cell. Therefore, the cell will appear in just one scene. However, since the scene is just in one location it is still an important location and is worthy of significant description.

In this situation, you present the description into a couple of paragraphs:

The cell is a small, square room. It is about six foot in height with each wall no more then four feet in length. There is a single window halfway up one wall. It is perfectly square and lets in a small amount of light, though it is blocked by a grill. The only other source of light is a single bulb that hangs from the center of the ceiling. Along the opposite wall is a squat bed. Its frame is steel but years of use leave numerous scratches and knocks. On the bed is a yellow mattress mottled with strains. The only way into or out of the cell is a single, heavy grey door.

Now, let's look at the same description but this time in a different context.

This time our main character has been locked up in the cell and will not escape until near the end of the book. The cell will be the

location for a number of scenes and is, therefore, a vital location for the story. In this case, the location will appear in a number of scenes. This approach is now different. When the location is first introduced we provide the reader with a significant, but not extended description. Then, as the scenes progress the writer will layer in a number of short descriptions to add texture to the location:

The cell is a perfectly square room. It is about six foot in height with each wall no more than four feet in length. There is a single window halfway up one wall. A single bulb hangs from the center of the ceiling. There is a single bed, a yellowed mattress resting on a grey steel frame. The only way into or out of the cell is a single, heavy grey door.

Here you can see we have cut the initial description to a single paragraph. It is enough for the reader to form a picture in their mind's eye.

In a situation where a location will be used for a number of scenes you have a little more freedom. What you are able to do is layer in more detailed description. In this case you could write in a couple of sections, where the main character examines the room. Perhaps he tests out the bed, and then looks at the window; perhaps he bangs on the door or spots some writing on the wall. In each case you would layer in more description.

For example:

John looked closely at the bed. The mattress was yellowed and mottled with stains ranging in color from blood red to deep, dark brown. He lifted the mattress. The frame was gun metal grey, though it was scratched and dented. On the left hand leg someone had started to scratch out a series of tally marks, the lines of white clearly visible. Paul counted to thirty before giving up.

This process produces a layering effect. Each time it is repeated the location is further ingrained on the reader's mind.

Remember the key rules of thumb, when writing description are:

- If it changes, describe it.
- If it is trivial, then a line of description will do.
- If it is important, then go to town with your description.

Character Description

Having looked at location description, we now turn our attention to character description. Many of the rules of thumb, which applied to location description, will also apply to character description.

As the reader progresses through your book they will be creating and recreating a picture of the current scene in their mind's eye. This scene will consist of both the location and the characters. It is

your job, as a writer, to provide adequate character description.

So what is 'adequate'?

In short, you need to provide enough description that the reader is able to paint a picture of the character in their mind's eye. The same rule applies here as for the location – the more important the character, the more description that is required. So, for example, your main character should have a detailed, multi-layered description. This should consist of not only a basic physical description, but also the character's physical ticks and traits. On the flip side, minor characters should have description levels that match their importance (or lack of it). If the character is a fleeting component of a minor scene, then a simple 'the postman', may well be enough.

One rule of thumb to use when writing character description is that if a character is to appear in just one scene, then include just a simple one line description. However, the more scenes in which the character appears, the more description is required.

As an example, here's the opening description for The Old Man who is one of the two main characters in Ernest Hemingway's The Old Man and the Sea. This description appears in the second paragraph of the story:

The old man was thin and gaunt with deep wrinkles in the back of his neck. The brown blotches of the benevolent skin cancer the sun brings from its reflection on the tropic sea were on his cheeks. The blotches ran well down the sides of his face and his hands had the deep-creased scars from handling heavy fish on the cords. But none of these scars were fresh. They were as old as erosions in a fishless desert.

Let's go back to our mate John for an example. Imagine that you are writing a book in which a package has been sent to John. It is important that the reader knows John received the package, therefore you write this short scene...

The ring of the doorbell echoed down the sparse hallway. John stepped into the hall and walked to the closed door. Turning the brass handle he swung the door open. On the doorstep stood the uniformed postman, a brown crumpled package in his hands.

"John Smith?" the postman said looking at the address label.

"Yup," John said.

"Here you go," the postman said, handing over the parcel and turning to leave.

"Thanks," John said as he closed the door.

In this section the postman is simply 'uniformed'. This is the postman's one and only appearance in the book. He was nothing more

than a tool to get the parcel into John's hands. Therefore, there is no need to layer in a detailed description.

Now... let's look at another example.

Let's take the same scene but this time the postman is of more importance. It turns out the postman is actually a hit man who is following John. A few scenes later we will see John going to the pub for a drink with his friends, he's going to bump into the postman (who is following him), but is not going to recognize him. However, we want the keen eyed reader to make the link.

Suddenly, the importance of the postman is increased. However, we face one small problem. If we were to layer in a very detailed description, the reader would smell a rat. We've been trained to match the description level with importance, more of that later.

So, in this example we are looking to balance the description with enough to make an impression, but not so much the reader is suspicious.

The ring of the doorbell echoed down the sparse hallway. John stepped into the hall and walked to the closed door. Turning the brass handle he swung the door open. On the doorstep stood the uniformed postman, a brown crumpled package in his hands. The postman was taller than John, his smiling face, adorned with a long handlebar moustache, beamed down.

"John Smith?" the postman said looking at the address label.

"Yup," John said.

"Here you go," the postman said, handing over the parcel and turning to leave.

"Thanks," John said as he closed the door.

This time we've added in a new line of description. Though not subtle, it is enough for the reader to paint a new picture of the postman. It is also enough that when we mention 'handlebar moustache' in a couple of scene's time the reader may make the connection. One little tip... the postman in this scene is actually based on someone I know, who, incidentally, is not a postman. So when I wrote this scene I had an image of my friend in my mind. Though I only added the moustache, the character appearance is fully detailed in my mind's eye.

The final type of character description is for your main characters. If you look back at the location section you will see the concept of layering description. The same concept applies for your main characters. Though we want you to build detailed descriptions of your character's features and actions, we don't want to do it all at once. In fact, we want to do the opposite.

When a major character is first introduced to the reader you should

include a couple of lines of description. At this point you are focusing on the major features. You are trying to paint a very rough outline of the character, just enough for the reader to conjure an image in their head. For example, 6ft, blond hair and blue eyes will be enough in the first instance. Then, over the following scenes, you need to start layering in more detailed descriptions. This is not only physical description, but also habits and ticks that will bring your character to life. If your character strokes his beard whilst thinking, then you need to be adding this in early on. A good place to do this is via beats.

You must resist the temptation to go overboard. A line or two of description, every couple of scenes will be enough. You must not overload the reader. The problem is that each time you add a layer of description you are triggering the reader to redraw the image in their mind's eye. If you change too quickly, or too often, you will just confuse the reader.

If done slowly and methodically, this system will allow you to build a complex series of physical attributes for your character. Over time the reader will pick up on the traits and allow you to add another level to your story telling.

"Remember that guy in the pub with the moustache?" said John stroking

his beard. "I am sure I've seen him before."

Description Matches Importance

It has already been said that the level of description must match the importance of the character, but this is worthy of a little further examination. Over the years readers have been trained to see low levels of description as indicating that the character in question is unimportant.

This is the Red Shirt principle.

In the 60s Sci Fi series Star Trek it became an in-joke that any red shirted crew man, joining Kirk and his team for an off-ship planet visit, was doomed to a grisly death. A fan, with too much time on his hands, worked out that of the fifty nine crew members killed in the original series, forty three (73%) were wearing red shirts.

Of course, red shirts were just that, red shirts. They had no back-story, no development and often no name.

Your novel will be packed with red shirts, characters with so little description that the reader will see them but ignore them. The postman with the moustache was a red shirt. These are the glue that holds your plot together.

Now... a word of warning.

In some stories you will want to trick the reader, you will want to sneak an important character into a scene, but disguise them as a red shirt. As a rule this should be avoided. There is no more guaranteed way to upset a reader than to have a red shirt turn out to be a major part of a plot.

Remember the unwritten rule... the more description the more important the character. The reader knows this rule, they've been trained with years of books and movies to understand that characters with no back-story can be ignored. It is an unwritten rule. If you simply break this rule to trick the reader, they will be angered.

But what happens if you want to hide a character in plain sight?

Perhaps you are writing a crime genre and you want the killer in the plot without the reader knowing. What you mustn't do in this situation is make the character a red shirt. Instead, you can use stereotyping.

Stereotyping is when you call upon a well-understood character type to short cut the description process. If I say 'frail old man', or 'huge body builder' or 'grumpy teenager', they all conjure up an image. A stereotype.

In fact, you should routinely use stereotypes to short cut your description process. In fact, the best way to wield a red shirt is

via a stereotype. Look at our postman (without the moustache), when I said postman, you conjured up a ready made image. I didn't need to say anything else; you had already done all the work.

However, you can use this stereotype to distract the reader.

This is not the same as tricking the reader by making a red shirt a major character, this is using the reader's own stereotype to hide a character in plain sight.

In Roald Dahl's short story The Landlady, Dahl gives us a master class in stereotyping.

The story goes like this... The main character Billy Weaver stays at a bed and breakfast ran by a charming old lady. The twist to the story is that the old lady is... (look away now if you've not read the story) a serial killer who plans to poison Billy and have him stuffed. The problem Dahl faces is how can he trick the reader into thinking the Landlady is harmless until the last possible moment? The slight of hand comes in the unexpected behavior of the landlady. Dahl intentionally has his killer in plain sight.

The first we see of the landlady is this description...

She was about forty-five or fifty years old, and the moment she saw him, she gave him a warm welcoming smile.

Then, on the next page...

She was half-way up the stairs, and she paused with one hand on the stair-rail, turning her head and smiling down at him with pale lips.

Add to this the narrator's insistence that she is a 'dotty' lady and who would expect her of anything harmful?

The power of Dahl's writing is that he gives us what we expect. The narrator TELLS us she is a 'dotty, old woman' and we believe him, why wouldn't we? Dahl wrote *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (though *The Twits* is my all time favorite book), he wouldn't lie to us, would he? Dahl's plays on our stereotypes. We are told it's an old woman, so we see an old woman.

The result is a memorable twist. This all said, the foundation for character description is not complicated:

- If you are describing your main character, layer in description over a number of scenes.
- If the character will play a part in more than one scene, add a few lines of description (and perhaps a layer or two).
- If the character is a red shirt, then less is more.

Action Description

We have examined the role of location and character description, discovering that the amount of description needed depends on the

importance of the location or character. We now turn our attention to action. The best place to start, when discussing description of action, is to clarify exactly what is meant by action.

In the context of novel writing, action is anything that happens.

So... if your main character makes a cup of coffee. This is action and would need a description.

If your character is watching someone else making a cup of coffee, then this is action and also needs a description.

If your character is fighting off three ninjas, who are riding genetically mutated unicorns, then, yes this is awesome, but it is also action.

From a technical viewpoint there is no differentiation between the type or intensity of action. If it happens in the scene, then it needs a description.

Let's start with a little word of warning. It is very easy to slip into TELL when action enters your story. TELL must always be avoided. ALWAYS.

Perhaps, this is time for a little confession. When I wrote the examples for this book I kept, unintentionally, slipping into TELL. I just couldn't help it. However, with each rewrite I weeded out the TELL and replaced it with SHOW. The moral of the story is that we

all, accidentally, use TELL from time-to-time. It doesn't make you a bad person, as long as you work hard to remove it with each edit. Now using adverbs, they do make you a bad person.

Here's an example from our mate John...

John made a cup of coffee and sat down to answer his emails.

This is TELL. You are telling the reader what is happening. You are not showing them via description.

Here's the same section but as SHOW...

John picked up the kettle and walked to the sink. He turned on the tap and allowed the water to fill the kettle. He returned to the work surface, plugged in the kettle and turned it on.

This is SHOW. In this example of action, you are SHOWING the reader what is happening. They are part of the story; they can see it unfold before their eyes and, therefore, they remain an active part of the process. You must constantly be on the look out for TELL. If the narrator is telling, then stop and SHOW.

Now... it pains me to say this but there's an exception to the rule. It is just that, an exception; it is not an excuse for you to TELL.

It is OK (sometimes, occasionally) to use TELL. However, it must be done consciously and with forethought.

Here's the problem - If you are showing everything, each little action, then your book can rapidly become very boring. If taken to the extreme the concept of SHOW says that you should describe every step, every breath, even every blink of an eye.

Of course, this is stupid.

Blink. Blink. Blink.

But it does present a problem.

How do you deal with the boring and mundane stuff?

Do you really want to describe your character making a cup of tea?

Probably not... but go back and look at those two passages, the second (with the SHOW) is more enjoyable to read. You feel part of the process. Therefore, it becomes a balance. You want to SHOW as much as possible, but sometimes a simple 'John made a cup of coffee' is the best option.

The key is that when you do TELL you know you are doing it, and most importantly, WHY you are doing it.

If something happens in a scene, that is:

- So mundane that is verging on boring if described.
- So commonly understood that there is a shared understanding of the action, then you can get away with a bit of TELL.

If we go back to John and his caffeine habit:

John made a cup of coffee.

This statement fulfills both of the criteria. It is both mundane and commonly understood. We all know what it means to 'make coffee', plus no one in their right mind wants to read a description of someone 'making coffee'.

Ok, let's look at this principle in action...

Say your story calls for two scenes. The first scene is in Location A and the second in Location B. Your main character will be getting in his car in Location A and travelling to Location B.

This means you will need to write the first scene in Location A and the second in location B. Now, if you are strictly applying the SHOW principle, then you are going to have to write a third scene. This is the "travelling scene" in which the character moves between locations. The problem is that this "travelling scene" is pointless. It fails to move the plot forward or develop the characters and is, therefore, just a waste of the reader's attention (and there's NOTHING more valuable than the reader's attention).

The answer to this problem is simpler than it may first seem. Your reader is not stupid. They will understand that the character will travel from Location A to Location B. Therefore, you don't need to

SHOW them, and you can just let it happen off page.

One of the great advantages of the Show, Don't Tell Methodology is that the reader is firmly engaged in the world of the narrator. Since you have actively tied them to this world they are able to accept that events occur away from the narrator.

This can be used to a greater or lesser extent.

At one extreme they will accept that if a character leaves Location A and gets in their car, then they will drive in that car to Location B. This is a mundane and commonly understood event and, therefore, there's no need to describe it to the reader. To a greater extent, they are also able to understand that characters 'do things' off page. So if a character leaves one scene and then turns up a couple of scenes later with a broken arm, this is acceptable. You will probably need to explain the broken arm in the dialogue, but you don't need to describe it in the action.

The result is that the way to avoid writing a complex and pointless travel scene is to do the following.

'Ok, I'm off,' John said as he picked up his car keys.

'Where are you going?' Sally said, her voice drifting from the next room.

'To see Paul.'

'Right see you later.'

John slowed the car as he pulled into Paul's drive, the house ahead of him looming tall in the morning light.

The spacer (***) indicates to the reader that time has passed and something has happened whilst they were not reading (in this case John has driven his car). It also indicates that whatever 'happened' was not important enough to be in the story.

To summarize, the rules for writing description are pretty common sense:

- Ensure that you SHOW description not TELL.
- Unless it is mundane and boring, then a little TELL goes a long way.

Describing Emotion

Description of character, actions and events is normally something writers find easy to understand, once the basic elements have been explained. However, weaving emotion into your novel, with being able to fall back on TELL (he was sad), is no easy task.

The key to understanding the best way to deal with emotion is to revert back to the principles of Show, Don't Tell. The fundamental

concept of the system, is that if you are able to provide a truthful description of a character's words and actions, this will stimulate an emotion in the reader.

At the most basic level TELLING the reader someone is sad will do nothing, but SHOWING the reader someone is sad, by describing the actions of a sad person, will stimulate a level of sadness in the reader.

If we are able to SHOW the reader an emotion, describing them in a way that triggers their own internal emotions, we are going to produce a far more powerful reading experience than one in which we TELL the reader how to feel.

Once again this is the Show, Don't Tell Methodology at work.

Here's an example:

John cried with sadness.

This is pure TELL. We are TELLING the reader John is sad. This is emotionally sterile. We don't want to reader to know John is sad we want them to feel his sadness.

Try this example:

John slumped into the chair. He leaned forward, placed his head in his hands and sobbed. Huge body shaking sobs wracked through John's body, each coming in a wave and with each sob he let out a low whimper.

In this example we SHOW the reader John is sad. We are not TELLING the reader what John is feeling, we describe John's sadness. In the process we create a narrative space. Since we don't tell the reader what John is feeling they are forced to try and work it out. It is this narrative space that the reader will fill. They try to match John's actions with actions they have seen or experienced. In the process, they trigger that same emotion within their own mind.

Your job, and perhaps the most difficult part of writing, is to write descriptions of action that are truthful reflections of the way a character would act whilst experiencing a certain emotion. The more truthful your description, the deeper your understanding of human nature, the more powerful your writing will become.

Now imagine this same example at the end of a scene where John has just returned from hospital after identifying his five-year-old daughter's body following her death in a car crash.

Hold that image in your mind and read the example a second time:

John slumped into the chair. He leaned forward, placed his head in his hands and sobbed. Huge body shaking sobs wracked through John's body, each coming in a wave and with each sob he let out a low whimper.

Now that's power - 'John cried with sadness' my arse.

[Chapter 6: Narrative Voice >>](#)

Narrative Voice

In this section I will look at the narrative voice and show that its role is far more than as a descriptive tool. I will show that the narrative voice should also be used to pass a character's thoughts to the reader. However, we will explain the best way in which to do this, and how to avoid it slipping into TELL.

Types of Narrative Voice

In the next section, we will examine the roll of the narrator and look at the types of things you should and shouldn't be putting in your narrative summary. However, before we look at these deeper technical issues, we must first examine what is meant by narrator.

In its most simple terms, the narrator is the voice in your book that is not that of the character. In other words,

anything you write, which does not come from the mouths of your character, is narrative summary. However, the narrator is not you... let me explain.

Let's go back to a well-worn example:

John walked into the cramped three-bedroom house carrying a large cardboard box with a massive pink ribbon bowed at the top. He found his sister leaning on the doorframe of the open back door, the final drags of a cigarette in her hand. When she saw John, she flicked the cigarette butt into the garden, and then turned to him, her face beaming with a smile.

"John. Is that for me?" she said nodding at the box. John smiled back, pushing the box onto the kitchen table, its awkward weight evident.

"I don't see any other birthday girls about, do you?" John looked about in an exaggerated motion before leaning in and kissing his sister on the cheek. "You'd better open it quick, its not the kind of present that likes to be kept waiting."

She danced from foot-to-foot as she tugged at the pink ribbon. As soon as the ribbon fell away the box lid forced its own way open with an explosion of black fur, ears, eyes and nose. John's sister scooped up the dog.

'A puppy. I love him.'

In the example above, all of the narration has been put into italics. You can see that the narrator is the person telling you the story. They are the person who is communicating directly with the reader. Therefore, novels contain two types of voice. The character's voices AND the narrator's voice.

However, and this is important, the narrator's voice is NOT the writer's voice.

In fact, many people who are experts on these matters will argue that the definition of a work of fiction is that the voice of the narrator is different from the voice of the writer.

Ermm... Sounds obvious, but think about it. When writing non-fiction the narrator's voice IS the writer's voice. The narrator's views and the writer's views are the same.

If you read a book on the history of the British Army between 1815 and 1945, the voice of the narrator is the same as the voice of the historian. It is as if the historian has dictated the words.

However, in fact, the narrator is NOT the writer. The narrator is a character the writer controls. The narrator can say things that a writer believes to be untrue, that's fiction.

Types of Narrator

In broad terms, there are two types of narrator for fiction books:

1. First person.

2. Third person.

In first person, the narrator is speaking directly to the reader from personal experience. The narrator will know nothing more of the story, than is revealed by the characters. You can spot a first person narrator a mile off, by the use of first person pronoun (I, we, our etc). Here's the opening section from Conrad's Heart of Darkness as an example:

The Nellie, a cruising yawl, swung to her anchor without a flutter of the sails, and was at rest. The flood had made, the wind was nearly calm, and being bound down the river, the only thing for it was to come to and wait for the turn of the tide.

The sea-reach of the Thames stretched before us like the beginning of an interminable waterway. In the offing the sea and the sky were welded together without a joint, and in the luminous space the tanned sails of the barges drifting up with the tide seemed to stand still in red clusters of canvas sharply peaked, with gleams of varnished sprits. A haze rested on the low shores that ran out to sea in vanishing flatness. The air was dark above Gravesend, and farther back still seemed condensed into a mournful gloom, brooding motionless over the biggest, and the greatest, town on earth.

The Director of Companies was our captain and our host. We four affectionately watched his back as he stood in the bows looking to seaward. On the whole river there was nothing that looked half so nautical. He resembled a pilot, which to a seaman is trustworthiness personified. It was difficult to realize his work was not out there in the luminous estuary, but behind him, within the brooding gloom.

In third person, the narrator is telling the story and has a wider knowledge of the story, than is told by the characters. By this I mean that the narrator knows what is happening in events beyond those described in the scenes.

Here's the opening to Jane Austin's, *Pride and Prejudice* as an example:

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.

However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighbourhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families, that he is considered the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters.

"My dear Mr. Bennet," said his lady to him one day, "have you heard that Netherfield Park is let at last?"

Mr. Bennet replied that he had not.

"But it is," returned she; "for Mrs. Long has just been here, and she told me all about it."

Mr. Bennet made no answer.

"Do you not want to know who has taken it?" cried his wife impatiently.

"You want to tell me, and I have no objection to hearing it."

This was invitation enough.

"Why, my dear, you must know, Mrs. Long says that Netherfield is taken by a young man of large fortune from the north of England; that he came down on Monday in a chaise and four to see the place, and was so much delighted with it, that he agreed with Mr. Morris immediately; that he is to take possession before Michaelmas, and some of his servants are to be in the house by the end of next week."

"What is his name?"

"Bingley."

At this point, all you really need to know about narrative voice is that there are two types of voice, first and third.

If you go delving into this topic elsewhere, you will find much written on the theory of narrative. It is an academic subject in its own right. You will find discussions of different types of narrator and their role in the story. This is all good and, mostly, very interesting. However, for the context of this book, it is not needed.

This all said there is one little wrinkle that you may find very helpful and that's the two main type of third person viewpoints:

- Third Person Omniscient.
- Third Person Limited.

Third Person Limited – In modern writing this is, by far, the most common type of narrative viewpoint. In short, the narrative summary is written with a focus on just one character. This means that though each chapter will be written

from a third person perspective, the events described will focus on a single character.

Third Person Omniscient – This is a less common narrative perspective, though it still seen in modern writing. Third person omniscient has the narrator focus on multiple characters. This means that even though there may be one main character, you will often see chapters that focus fully on other characters. Two very popular examples of this narrative standpoint are The Da Vinci Code and the Game of Thrones series.

OK... so let's get down to the nitty gritty.

Using Narrative Voice

Having looked at narrative voice (first or third) and defined narrative summary (stuff the narrator says) we now turn our attention to using the narrator within the Show, Don't Tell Methodology.

There's one concept that's essential for you to grasp if you are going to transform your writing and that is...

Not everything the narrator says is TELL.

Let me put that another way...

Not all narrative summary is TELL. Many people learning the Show, Don't Tell Methodology get caught up in the narrative summary and seem to flinch away from the narrator's voice. They become fearful that anything that they put in the narrative will be seen as TELL. Well, that's not true. In fact, the opposite is true. The narrator plays an essential part in your story.

Let's return to a rule of thumb that you can use when assessing your writing:

- Dialogue is for moving the plot forward and passing backstory.

- Narrative summary is for describing actions, locations and people.

It is, therefore, not narrative summary that is your enemy, it is TELL.

So what's TELL?

Well, TELL is stuff you put into the narrative summary that is something other than 'describing actions, locations and people'.

TELLING in the narrative summary is one of the following:

- The character's back-story - This is when the narrator TELLS the reader about something that has happened in the past.

- Non-described action - This is when the narrator TELLS the reader about action. For example, 'the boy was sad' is TELL, while 'the boy sobbed, tears streaming down his cheeks' is SHOW.

Let me just dwell on the 'non-described' action for a moment.

It's been said that narrative summary should contain action, so how is non-described action now TELL.

Look at this example:

A beautiful woman walked down the crowded street.

Description?

No. This is TELL. The writer is TELLING the reader the woman is beautiful and the streets are crowded. The narrator must do the

opposite and SHOW. They should describe the woman and the crowded street.

Try it. Pop open a blank Word doc and write out a paragraph that DESCRIBES the woman and the street.

Once you have grasped the basics of Show, Don't Tell, there's one more level of understanding that's needed if you are to lift your writing to the highest level.

Much of the technique we've looked at so far in this book is pushing you towards a very filmic style of writing. There are times when the technique is calling for a style of writing that seems to consist almost exclusively of dialogue and described action. I've even suggested a technique called The Camera Test. However, if your entire novel contains only description, then you are missing one of the most wonderful aspects of novel writing.

This is that novels have the ability for the reader to gain an insight into the writer's interpretation of life. The writer, using the narrator, is able to provide the reader with a unique way of seeing the world.

In short, a great novel will change the way you see the world.

Deep stuff I know, but this is the secret sauce that will transform your writing from good to great.

Here's an example to illustrate this point. This comes from Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*. It's about ten pages into the book and comes just after the old man has caught a huge fish...

Then he began to pity the great fish that he had hooked. He is wonderful and strange and who knows how old he is, he thought. Never have I had such a strong fish nor one who acted so strangely. Perhaps he is too wise to jump. He could ruin me by jumping or by a wild rush. But perhaps he has been hooked many times before and he knows that this is how he should make his fight. He cannot know that it is only one man against him, nor that it is an old man. But what a great fish he is and what will he bring in the market if the flesh is good. He took the bait like a male and he pulls like a male and his fight has no panic in it. I wonder if he has any plans or if he is just as desperate as I am?

This is a perfect example of narrative voice being used to add depth but without TELL.

Remember TELL is either dumping backstory or TELLING the reader about actions or a character's feeling.

This is not TELL, it is narrative summary at its best.

Why? What makes this SHOW, not TELL?

The key comes in the opening two sentences:

Then he began to pity the great fish that he had hooked. He is wonderful and strange and who knows how old he is, he thought.

What this does is sets the remainder of the paragraph as the character's thoughts. The narrator is not TELLING us what the old man is thinking, he is SHOWING us the character's thoughts.

And this is the key... you can use the narrator to SHOW the reader what a character is thinking.

There's four little technical points to consider when using narrative summary to present a character's thoughts:

- 1.Thoughts are always in the present. They are a reflection of the current events.

- 2.Thoughts are not a way to present backstory. They are not a way to give the reader a vital clue about the plot. They are a way to add context to a character and their reaction to the current events.

3.Thoughts are not a way to present emotion. They are not a short cut from describing/showing how a person is reacting to an event.

4.Thoughts should be used cautiously. If used on occasion, to reinforce key issues, thoughts via the narrative summary can be very powerful. However, if overused they lose their power very quickly.

In the next section we will look at some real life examples of narrative summary in action.

Examples of Narrative Summary

Below are two real life examples of narrative summary. They are both taken from Hemingway's The Old Man and the Sea. The aim of these examples is to demonstrate how narrative summary can be used to enhance your writing without slipping into TELL.

When examining these examples please hold in your mind the following:

- Watch for TELL.

- Notice that the narrative summary is cemented in the present.

- Recognize the fact they are character's thoughts.

Example One

This is taken from the first half of the book, where the old man and the boy prepare for the fishing trip.

"What do you have to eat?" the boy asked.

"A pot of yellow rice with fish. Do you want some?"

"No. I will eat at home. Do you want me to make the fire?"

"No. I will make it later on. Or I may eat the rice cold."

"May I take the cast net?"

"Of course."

There was no cast net and the boy remembered when they had sold it. But they went through this fiction every day. There was no pot of yellow rice and fish and the boy knew this too.

"Eighty-five is a lucky number," the old man said. "How would you like to see me bring one in that dressed out over a thousand pounds?"

"I'll get the cast net and go for sardines. Will you sit in the sun in the doorway?"

"Yes. I have yesterday's paper and I will read the baseball."

The section of narrative summary that has been highlighted has the narrator showing the reader that the boy remembered the pot had been sold. The importance here is that it adds a new level of context to the exchange of dialogue.

By showing the reader that the boy knows the pot has been sold, the reader can see that the boy's interaction - "No. I will eat at home. Do you want me to make the fire?" - has a new meaning. The boy has chosen to interact in a way that protects The Old Man's feelings. The narrator is not TELLING us that the boy is kind; he is SHOWING us by adding context to the words. This is very powerful and should stir a deeper emotion in the reader.

The next section of this paragraph - But they went through this fiction every day. There was no pot of yellow rice and fish and the boy knew this too - is the narrator's voice. Remember the narrator knows everything. Yet rather than the narrator TELL us the boy is kind, he reinforces the point adding more context.

The point here is that the narrative summary never TELLS us the boy is kind, instead it SHOWS us.

Example Two

This section comes from later in the story. The Old Man is alone on the boat and has managed to catch the "great fish". He has been propped in his boat for many hours, unable to move, holding the line as the fish tries to escape.

The sun was hot now although the breeze was rising gently.

"I had better re-bait that little line out over the stern," he said. "If the fish decides to stay another night I will need to eat again and the water is low in the bottle. I don't think I can get anything but a dolphin here. But if I eat him fresh enough he won't be bad. I wish a flying fish would come on board tonight. But I have no light to attract them. A flying fish is excellent to eat raw and I would not have to cut him up. I must save all my strength now. Christ, I did not know he was so big."

"I'll kill him though," he said. "In all his greatness and his glory."

Although it is unjust, he thought. But I will show him what a man can do and what a man endures.

"I told the boy I was a strange old man," he said.

"Now is when I must prove it."

The thousand times that he had proved it meant nothing. Now he was proving it again. Each time was a new time and he never thought about the past when he was doing it.

The first thing to notice is that Hemingway has the old man talking aloud, perhaps to himself, perhaps to the fish, perhaps to God. The beauty of this is that it allows the writer to keep the story moving with resorting, exclusively, to narrative summary.

The first section of narrative summary is clearly a thought – ‘Although it is unjust, he thought’. Yet the thought adds context to the dialogue. The book’s major theme is the fight between man and nature and this simple thought pushes this into the reader’s mind. It acts as a contrast between the action and a meaning for the action. Hemingway is using the action and the narrative summary to force the reader to think differently about man’s role in the world.

The second section sees the narrator passing a judgment on The Old Man. The narrator is telling the reader something about The Old Man. It adds context to the character’s action, but forces the reader to think more deeply about the action. The Old Man

says aloud "I told the boy I was a strange old man", but it is the narrator that forces the reader to look more deeply into this statement. How is The Old Man strange? How has he proved it in the past? Why keep on proving it?

In these two examples, it can be seen that by both using character's thoughts and directive narrative voice, a writer can add an additional context to a character words and actions. So... on the most basic level the job of narrative summary is to describe the actions of characters. However, there is a second more valuable and more powerful role. This is to force the reader into a place where they add additional depth and meaning to these words and actions. If done correctly, this will turn any good novel into a great novel and a work of art.

Yet, one of the great ironies of novel writing is that this one simple strategy is the hardest of all. Writers, such as Hemingway, dedicated their whole careers to trying to make it work. For most writers, this is the most worthy and valuable of journeys.

Over the following lessons, you'll examine five separate key areas of formatting dialogue, each of which will deal with a different aspect of the topic. In this lesson, we will look at some of the fundamental rules of formatting dialogue.

I have tried to tackle this topic in bite-size chunks, with each lesson addressing a few simple points.

New Speaker, New Paragraph

This is a simple rule to apply and one that should not be broken under any circumstance.

The rule is that each new speaker should have their own paragraph. This means that, if John and Bill are in a conversation, each time a speaker changes to another character, you make a new paragraph.

Take a look at this example below. We'll be specifically using this same example throughout the course, and you will see it evolve as each new rule is applied. As it stands, it is just a lump of unformatted text, all in one paragraph. At this stage, don't worry about anything other than the "new speaker, new paragraph" rule.

hi said John as he stretched out his hand hello joked Bill shaking John's hand have you been here long John questioned no I've just arrived Bill said ok

This is not the most inspiring of exchanges, but it will help to demonstrate each rule as it is learned.

The “new speaker, new paragraph” rule tells us that, each time John or Bill speaks, their dialogue should be in a separate paragraph. Let’s apply the rule.

The example now reads ...

hi said John as he stretched out his hand

hello joked Bill shaking John’s hand

have you been here long John questioned

no I’ve just arrived Bill said

ok

This is still in a pretty raw state, but you can already see that it is starting to take some shape.

Adding Quotation Marks

Having separated the different speakers into new paragraphs, we now turn our attention to the spoken words. It is important that the reader is able to distinguish the words of the narrator (sometimes called narrative summary) from the words of the characters (dialogue).

I am sure you get this, but let me drill this point home. When writing dialogue, it is essential that you see the words the characters speak ("Hi," "Hello," etc.) as separate from those of the narrator (said John as he stretched out his hand).

In fact, when teaching writing, one of the first topics I address is to get authors to see their novels as made up of both characters AND a narrator. If you are able to separate these in your mind, many of the advanced writing techniques (which are outside the scope of this course) are so much easier to grasp.

Anyway, back to the job in hand ...

Now we need to add quotation marks in our example. These are simple punctuation marks that are added at the start and end of words spoken by your characters.

Before we apply the rule to our specific example, it is worth taking a moment to discuss the two types of quote marks you'll see used.

- These are single (') and double (") opening quotation marks.
- These are single (') and double (") closing quotation marks.

Despite what you may read elsewhere, there is no "correct" quote mark to use; both are OK, depending on the usage.

This all said, there is a rule of thumb. Most American authors tend to use double quote marks as their default for dialogue, while British authors tend to use single quote marks. However, you must pick one and stick with it. If you start with single for dialogue, then use single all throughout your book. If you start with double, then stick with that. I am sure you get the picture. Be consistent.

There is an occasion where you'd mix the two, but there's no need to worry about that yet, and we'll deal with this in a later email.

Let's apply this to our particular example (we are going to use double quote marks for our US authors here). I am going to sandwich each phrase spoken by the characters in between a pair of quote marks. Remember, characters and narrator are different people.

“hi” said John as he stretched out his hand

“hello” joked Bill shaking John’s hand

“have you been here long” John questioned

“no I’ve just arrived” Bill said

“ok”

You’ll see here that we have added an opening quote mark where the character starts speaking and then another when they stopped speaking (a closing quote mark). If using curly quote marks, as is the US standard, then you can easily tell the opening from the closing mark, whether a single quote mark or a double.

Remember, only put quote marks around words spoken by characters. Actions and description coming from the narrator should never be placed within quote marks.

NOTE: Here is one exception that comes to mind. Sometimes added emphasis is put on a word of narration and either italics or quote marks are used for that. Example: She wasn’t sure when “later” would come. Alternate example: She wasn’t sure when later

would come.

Well, that's all for today, folks.

The key points to take away are:

- Each new speaker should be in a new paragraph.
- Use quote marks to identify words spoken by characters.
- Double quote marks are the US default. Single quote marks are the UK default.

Choose one style (depending on the country you intend to publish in). Be consistent when using your default style.

In the last lesson, you learned two important elements of writing dialogue. These were “new speaker, new paragraph” and the use of quotation marks. Today we turn our attention to the nitty-gritty of punctuation to learn the best ways to present your conversations between characters.

I just want to start by saying that, if you are a bit fuzzy about punctuation, you are not alone. [I've edited hundreds of authors](#), and some of the best authors I've worked with struggle with punctuation.

The good news is that the basics are pretty easy to grasp, once they are set out in a clear manner.

The Basics of Punctuation

The most common problem we see with mispunctuated dialogue is when an author uses a comma or period incorrectly.

This happens when an author treats the words spoken by a character and those spoken by the narrator as either (1) two different sentences when they should be one sentence, or (2) as one sentence when they should be two separate sentences.

Let me give you an example:

“hi” said John as he stretched out his hand

This sentence has two elements, the words of the character and the words of the narrator.

Hi - is spoken by the character.

SAID JOHN AS HE STRETCHED OUT HIS HAND - is the narrator.

Most authors know this instinctively and would have no problem telling these apart if you asked them to explain the structure of the sentence. The problem begins in knowing the rules on how they should be punctuated.

So here, HI is spoken by the character and SAID JOHN AS HE STRETCHED OUT HIS HAND are the words of the narrator.

You must NOT see these as two separate sentences, but as dialogue connected to narration by a dialogue tag ("said" or "asked" usually).

These two elements are just one sentence connected by a dialogue tag:

- Said/Asked Sentence = character's words + narrator's words

Now we can add some punctuation marks. We have established that this is a single sentence with a dialogue tag, and we know that most sentences end with a period.

Therefore, we can add this period to our example.

"hi" said John as he stretched out his hand.

The next problem is how we show the reader where the character's words end and the

narrator's words begin. The quotation marks do a lot of the heavy lifting here, but this sentence does need further punctuation.

The most common mistake we see in this situation is that the author will put a period between the character's words and the narrator's words.

"hi." said John as he stretched out his hand. [WRONG]

This is wrong. As we have established, this is a single sentence with a dialogue tag, and the moment you add a period, it then becomes two sentences.

To drill this home, I'll say it again ...

What we must NOT do is put a period between HI and SAID. This is not the end of the sentence.

However, you are correct in thinking that we need some kind of mark to separate the spoken words from the narrative. The punctuation mark we use here is a comma. This way the words for the character and the narrator remain part of the same sentence when a dialogue tag is present.

The comma is saying to the reader, "Oh, look. The character has spoken, but I still have

something to add to this sentence, so keep reading.”

Our example now becomes:

“hi,” said John as he stretched out his hand. [CORRECT]

Please note, per US grammar rules, the comma goes between the end of the spoken words and the closing quote mark.

Another very, very common mistake I see is for the punctuation mark to be on the wrong side of the quotation marks.

“hi” said John as he stretched out his hand. [CORRECT]

“hi”, said John as he stretched out his hand. [WRONG]

As we have discussed, this example is just a single sentence that uses quotation marks and a comma with a dialogue tag to connect words spoken by the character and the narrator.

OK, let’s go back to our schooling and apply another very basic rule. We know that all sentences must start with a capital letter. So, let’s add that to our example.

We now get:

"Hi," said John as he stretched out his hand.

This sentence is now correctly formatted for our purposes here.

We can apply these rules to the rest of the example. In the last email we left the example as follows:

"hi" said John as he stretched out his hand

"hello" joked Bill shaking John's hand

"have you been here long" John questioned

"no I've just arrived" Bill said

"ok"

Applying our dialogue punctuation rules, this becomes:

"Hi," said John as he stretched out his hand.

"Hello," joked Bill shaking John's hand.

"Have you been here long?" John questioned. [NOTE: Had this been a sentence, like the

other paragraphs in this example, the comma would be appropriate. However, here we have a question, so a question mark is needed in place of the comma. All the other rules apply regardless.]

"No I've just arrived," Bill said.

"Ok." [NOTE: The preferred spelling is "OK" (both letters capitalized) per Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, Sixteenth Edition.]

Notice that we've:

- Added capital letters to the start of each sentence.
- Added a period to the end of each sentence.
- Added commas between the spoken words and the narration (or question marks, as needed). These are inside the closing quotation marks.

If you look at the last sentence, you will see that it is a single word from a character but with no additional narration. This is still a single sentence, so the same rules apply. It starts with a capital letter and a period is added at the end. The period is before the closing quotation mark.

Summary

- All sentences start with a capital letter.
- Most sentences end with a period.
- Dialogue and narration are separated with a comma, which using a dialogue tag (which are "said" or "asked" in general).
-

In this lesson, we have looked at the basics of punctuation. The rules you have learned will allow you to present dialogue in the correct basic format. Tomorrow we'll examine the way in which dialogue is assigned to a character. This is known as attribution.

In the last lesson, we looked at the basics of dialogue punctuation. You learned the tools you need to correctly format basic dialogue. In this lesson, we will take this one step further and look at attribution (sometimes called "tagging" or "dialogue tags").

Attribution is basically showing the reader which of your characters is speaking, an ID. If we look at the first line of our example, we see the following:

"Hi," said John as he stretched out his hand.

Here the dialogue (in this case HI) is being attributed to John. In other words, John is saying hi.

It is that simple. This is attribution.

In addition to showing the reader who is speaking, attribution also involves telling the reader how the words are spoken. The most common (and best) form of attribution is said.

Let's take this a little further...

Here's the second line in our example:

"Hello," joked Bill shaking John's hand.

The dialogue (in this case HELLO) is correctly attributed to Bill, but, rather than using SAID, we've used JOKED.

Attribution (he said, she said, etc.) seems easy to understand, but there are some hidden traps. Authors often become bored of using SAID and start to use other forms of attribution. This is what we have done on the second line of our example, where we use JOKED instead of SAID.

This is actually a mistake, and many experienced authors would not consider it "best practice."

In fact, as a rule of thumb, you should avoid using anything other than SAID or ASKED if at all possible.

So, why is it so wrong to tag dialogue in this way?

The simplest answer is that it looks amateurish. It's the kind of dialogue you see in a schoolkid's textbook or from a two-bit creative writing class. If you use this type of attribution, you will be flagging yourself as a newbie author with little confidence in your ability to SHOW the speaker's emotion. Instead, you will come across as a newbie author who needs to TELL the reader every little thing that's happening.

Not good.

[Anyone notice I added a bit of show, don't tell? No? ... Good, I got away with it.]

There is a more complex reason ...

When you write, "Bill joked," you are TELLING the author the way in which Bill is speaking. Telling is bad. It means that you, as an author, are giving the reader no room to

maneuver. You are spoon-feeding the story to the reader. This pushes the reader on their back foot and leaves them no space to add their own interpretation to the story. Too much TELL and your reader will soon turn off.

The alternative is to SHOW the reader how the speaker is talking. Rather than relying on attributions such as "joked" to TELL the reader, the author must use the context and texture of the scene to SHOW the story. The words and actions that have come before the dialogue will SHOW the reader Bill's frame of mind and will allow the readers to adjust the dialogue within their mind's eye.

This way you are trusting the reader to "lean into" the story and be part of the process. If you look again at the first line in our example ("Hi," said John as he stretched out his hand.), the way in which John says hi is defined by the context of the previous paragraphs. We don't have these earlier paragraphs in this example, but, if this were a section of a novel, we would. For example, if John is meeting Bill in a noisy train station, then the hi might be spoken loudly. However, rather than writing "he said loudly," you allow the reader to make this decision. The reader is then forced to be part of the process and is sucked into your writing in a way that TELLING can never achieve.

This process is actually the secret source to great writing and is something that can take

years to master. I actually wrote a free ebook on this very topic, if you wish to learn more [LINK].

So ... what's the best practice when adding attribution to dialogue?

The answer is to use SAID (or ASKED, as appropriate).

Said is a magic word.

Readers are so used to seeing it that they start to ignore the word and "said" almost becomes a punctuation mark in its own right. This means that your dialogue starts to flow, and the reader will move quickly from speaker to speaker, adding in their own context and details as they go. When this flow starts to happen, the reader is fully captured by your writing.

OK ... this is heavy stuff and difficult to apply, but, when you get it right, it will lift your writing to a new level.

Yet it is not all unicorns and rainbows; there is a side effect of this approach. You can get a lot of SAID ping-pong.

Take this example:

"Hi," John said.

"Hi," Peter said.

"How are you doing?" John asked.

"Good," Peter said. "You?"

"Good. Thanks for asking," John said.

As you see, we have lots of "John said" and "Peter said" repetitions. The reader is forced to jump from SAID to SAID. This quickly becomes overwhelming (and a bit boring) for the reader.

There's actually a very simple solution.

Just don't add an attribution each time.

When SAID is too repetitious, just don't use anything, after you have identified each

speaker at the beginning of the dialogue exchange.

Readers aren't stupid. As an author, you must trust in your ability to paint a picture and the reader's ability to fill in the blanks. If there are just two people speaking in a scene, the reader does not need to be told time and again who is speaking. This means you can just ignore the attribution, once you initially ID ("tag") each of the two speakers.

Here's the example from above, written with a bit of common sense:

"Hi," John said.

"Hi," Peter said.

"How you doing?"

"Good. You?"

"Good. Thanks for asking."

This is not rocket science but will require you to think about dialogue slightly differently to apply this rule on a consistent basis.

Summary

- Use SAID (or ASKED when posing a question).
- Or use nothing.
- Trust in yourself and your reader.

Here we have examined the best way to use attribution in dialogue. We've also suggested that the context of the dialogue is important. Next, we will look more closely at the role of context and show how you can provide the reader with a more detailed picture.

In the last lesson, we looked at the role of attribution and how you must rely on the words before and surrounding the dialogue to give context to the spoken words. In this lesson, we will look at this in more detail and examine a method you can use to control the context of your dialogue.

We learned that, if we tell the reader how a character is speaking (he joked or she said loudly), then we are not giving the reader a chance to be part of the story. Instead, we are spoon-feeding the story to them and pushing them on their back foot.

If we remove this telling and create a "space" between the reader and the character, then

the reader will lean into the story and add their own meaning.

Let me dwell on this a second. The concept of "space" is a term I use to describe the situation in which the author allows the reader to add their own context to the story. If we are not telling the reader how the words are spoken but are instead just showing them the situation, the "space" is the gap that the reader must fill.

Anyway, onward ...

In the last lesson, we looked at attribution, but, in each of the examples we used, the attribution was added at the end of the dialogue.

For example:

"Hi," said John as he stretched out his hand.

Notice that the attribution (said John) is after the spoken words. However, though this is the most common way of presenting attribution, it is not the only solution.

It is possible (and sometimes desirable) to break up the dialogue by adding the attribution in the middle of the spoken words.

See this example:

"Hi. I'm taking the dog for a walk," said John, "then I'll buy some milk."

One thing to remember is that you must keep the punctuation consistent. One of the most common elements which trip up authors is which punctuation mark to use after the attribution. The answer to this is that it depends on the dialogue pattern.

If you are splitting a sentence, then it should be with a comma. However, if you are at the end of a sentence and before the start of another sentence, then use a period.

Another way to think about this is to ask yourself the question: is this one or two sentences? If one, then use a comma; if two, then go for the period.

Here's an example for splitting a sentence. Let's say we have this line of dialogue:

"I wanted to get a taxi, but the wait was too long, so I walked home instead."

I am going to add in the attribution after the "too long." The sentence remains intact, so we use a comma. Also, notice that "so" has no capital letter (Why would it be capitalized here in this sentence's construction? It is not a new sentence).

"I wanted to get a taxi, but the wait was too long," said John, "so I walked home instead."

Here's an example that is two different sentences.

"I really like cats. Some people like dogs, but I think they bark too much."

I am adding the attribution after "cats." Notice here that we now use a period after "said John" and that "Some" remains spelled with an initial capital letter. Also notice that we replace the period after "cats" with a comma, as it ties in with the attribution.

"I really like cats," said John. "Some people like dogs, but I think they bark too much."

Why Use Beats?

So far we have looked at the nitty-gritty of punctuating sentences with an attribution that splits up the sentence(s), but we have not addressed the question as to why, and when, doing this is a good idea.

You would use this technique for a number of reasons. This includes controlling the pace of the story, adding description and fleshing out your characters. However, in this case, there are two reasons that are important.

The first is to just add some variety in the flow of your dialogue. If you have a long section of dialogue, then you may want to break up the sentence structure a little and do something different for the reader. This also combats any potential SAID ping-pong (as discussed in the previous email).

The second reason is to add a “beat.” This is a short section of description in the middle of the dialogue. Beats are a very powerful way to add context to your spoken words.

Beats are a very masterful tool. Below is an example of a beat in action. Remember, in this situation, the beat has a very specific job: to add new context to a scene.

“I don’t see any other birthday girls, do you?” John looked around in an exaggerated motion, before leaning in and kissing his sister on the cheek. “You’d better open it quick. It’s not the kind of present that likes to be kept waiting.”

Now here’s the same example without the beat:

“I don’t see any other birthday girls, do you? You’d better open it quick. It’s not the kind of present that

likes to be kept waiting."

The beat is the section of description within dialogue. In the example above, the beat is how John looks around and kisses his sister.

A beat is nothing more complex than that, just a bit of description you add in between dialogue.

When using beats, you give a small bit of information, which you use to bring life to your character's words. Remember, we are adding context. Since you are not going to be adding in all those [nasty adverbs](#), you must give the reader the context they need to fill in the gaps. With beats, you are giving the reader clues about your characters, so the readers can add their own meaning to your character's words.

Look at the new example below:

John stood in the car park of the pub. It was dark, and the sky promised rain. A taxi pulled into the parking lot and made a circuit, before coming to a stop in front of John.

The driver rolled down his window, his dark skin and black hair visible in the dashboard lights.

"You order a taxi?" His voice was tinged with an oriental accent.

"No," John said, shuffling back from the car.

The driver shrugged and fumbled with his radio, speaking into it in a language John didn't understand.

A voice on the other end responded, too muffled for John to hear. The driver leaned over again. "You

sure, mate?"

"Yeah," John said. "I am sure."

"Ah ..." the driver said. "Do you want a lift anyway?"

"Aren't you supposed to only pick up planned fares?" There was a pause. "It doesn't matter. I am waiting for my sister. She'll be here any moment."

"OK," the driver said and pulled from the lot.

John watched the car leave, making a mental note of the plate number.

In this example, the beats have been used to add in some context for the reader; they are also adding clues for the reader about the character's thoughts and feelings.

Here's the same example, with the beats highlighted and explained:

John stood in the car park of the pub. It was dark, and the sky promised rain. A taxi pulled into the parking lot and made a circuit, before coming to a stop in front of John. [This is description delivered via narrative summary. Strictly speaking, the "promised rain" is TELL (I should have described the clouds), but it works in this context.]

The driver rolled down his window, his dark skin and black hair visible in the dashboard lights. [BEAT: This is a description prior to dialogue. The dark skin SHOWING the reader the driver is not white. I could have said "the Asian driver," but that's TELLING.]

"You order a taxi?" His voice was tinged with an oriental accent.

"No," John said, shuffling back from the car. [BEAT: I've decided that John distrusts Asian people. I am not sure why he's a racist, but that doesn't matter here, since it is not essential to the plot. Therefore, his internal voice says he mistrusts Asian people, and this is reflected in his actions. I am SHOWING the reader he is racist via his actions.]

The driver shrugged and fumbled with his radio, speaking into it in a language John didn't understand. A voice on the other end responded, too muffled for John to hear. The driver leaned over again. [BEAT: This is really a section of narrative summary, but, since it dissects dialogue, it is, technically, a beat.]

"You sure, mate?"

"Yeah," John said. "I am sure."

"Ah ..." the driver said. "Do you want a lift anyway?"

"Aren't you supposed to only pick up planned fares?" There was a pause. [BEAT: Slows the pace. Also suggests John is considering his next action. It is up to the reader to decide what John is thinking.] "It doesn't matter. I am waiting for my sister. She'll be here any moment."

"OK," the driver said and pulled from the lot.

John watched the car leave, making a mental note of the plate number. [BEAT: John watches the car and makes a note. This is his backstory at work, his prejudice forcing John to think the worst of the

Asian driver.]

I would also ask you to consider the fact that only "said" has been used for attributions here. There's no need for adverbs.

The final thing to say about beats is for them not to be overused. Long sections of dialogue are good.

You do want to create a rhythm and allow the reader to become comfortable with your writing style.

Yet a balance is needed. Too many beats and the dialogue drags; not enough and it whips by. Ultimately it is your choice.

Summary

- Beats are sections of description with dialogue.
- Use beats to add context to your character's words.
- Use beats with consideration. They have a precise job.

In this lesson, we've looked at beats and how they can add context to your dialogue. In the next lesson, we'll tie up a few loose ends and address a number of small issues that often trouble authors.

In the last lesson, we looked at beats and their importance in writing good dialogue. In this lesson, we'll tie up loose ends and examine a few issues that authors have when formatting dialogue in their books.

Direct Dialogue and Reported Dialogue

It is common for authors to be slightly confused by the concept of direct and reported dialogue and how each should be punctuated.

Direct dialogue is the easiest to understand. These are any original words a character says. In all the examples you have seen in these emails, we have only used direct dialogue.

For example: "Hi," John said - direct dialogue.

Reported dialogue is when a character is saying something that another character has already said. Before you look at an example, we need to consider the punctuation of reported dialogue.

As we have said in a previous email, dialogue uses either single or double quotation marks, depending on whether you choose to use British grammar rules or American, respectively. What is important to remember is that, when formatting reported dialogue within direct dialogue, you use the opposite of that which you use for direct dialogue.

So ... if you are using single quotation marks for direct dialogue (per British grammar rules), then use double quotes for reported dialogue. Thus, for US authors using

American grammar rules, then your default is double quote marks around direct dialogue, with single quote marks for reported dialogue.

Here's the US example ...

"I was talking to Sarah, and she was going on about her dog. 'She is really fluffy,' she said time and again. God, I hate that 'fluffy' dog," said John.

You'll notice here that not only is John a bit of a dick but he reported what Sarah said.

SHE IS REALLY FLUFFY was spoken originally by Sarah and only reported by John. As was the second use of FLUFFY.

Dialogue in Paragraphs

There will be times when writing your novel, that you want a character to give a long uninterrupted dialogue. However, you will probably not be comfortable putting all those words into one long paragraph.

The way to deal with this situation is to split the single-speaker's dialogue into separate paragraphs. However, in order to indicate to the reader that the SAME speaker is still talking, you need to leave out the closing quotation mark at the end of the trailing paragraphs, until the final paragraph of THIS speaker's dialogue.

The example below (taken from Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" speech) should make it clear:

"I have a dream that—one day down in Alabama, with its vicious racists, with its governor having his lips dripping with the words of interposition and nullification—one day right there in Alabama little black boys and black girls will be able to join hands with little white boys and white girls as sisters and brothers.

"I have a dream today.

"I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, and every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together."

Notice that each paragraph of dialogue starts with an opening quotation mark, but only the last paragraph has a closing quotation mark at the end.

About Attribution Before Dialogue

Strictly speaking, this should have been in the attribution email, but this is more of a

suggestion than a rule. In recent years it has been considered bad practice to start a section of dialogue with the attribution.

See the example below:

John said, "I am happy to go to Sarah's house but don't expect me to touch her stupid dog."

In an ideal world, the attribution should be at the end or perhaps after "house."

The reason I've left this suggestion out of the attribution email is that there's no logical reason why you can't start a sentence with an attribution. Personally, I feel it is a little clumsy but hardly a crime. This said, the trend in editing is to move away from starting dialogue with the attribution, which is now considered a sign of amateur authors.

He Said Versus Said He

While on the topic of trends in writing, I think something should be said about the order of the attribution.

Many editors (and readers) consider the old "said John" approach as a sign of amateur writing. This is considered by many in the know to be old-fashioned and outdated.

For example, this would be considered wrong:

"Hi," said John.

The correct version would be:

"Hi," John said.

Again this is one of those suggestions rather than rules. However, I'd consider it to be a best writing practice. The thinking behind it is that you would say "he said" but not "said he."

This brings us to the end of our short course. You should now have all the tools you need to write correctly formatted dialogue. However, we have one more email coming your way. In this email, you will find an exercise you can use to practice your new skills.