

Drafting Your Short Story – The Importance of “Showing”

“Don’t *tell* me the moon is shining; *show* me the glint of light on broken glass.”
 —Anton Chekhov (1860-1904) – famous Russian writer of short stories

When narrating a story, every writer needs to know how to *use and balance* these two opposite skills:

- 1) “Tell” (or “*speed up*”) – get to *the point*; state ideas and events *plainly*, without descriptive details
- 2) “Show” (or “*slow down*”) – *bring the experience to life* for the reader; use *sensory details* and *dialogue* to convey a vivid picture of events, characters, and settings

There are times in every story when “showing” details and dialogue are necessary in order to make the desired impact on your reader. Effective **pacing** is the proper balancing of “telling” and “showing” in a story; it is what enables a writer to keep the reader *engaged*, to make *smooth shifts* in time and place, and to *focus the reader’s attention* only on the important events and interactions.

Telling vs. Showing – Ways to Make an Impact with Sensory Details and Dialogue

“Show” a Setting	
The house looked old.	The two-story house slouched in a yard choked with weeds, its paint faded and flaking, the lace curtains in its windows yellowed with age.
“Show” a Character’s Appearance	
The woman was dressed professionally.	She wore an ash-gray Armani pants suit paired with a blue linen blouse, and a red silk tie knotted at her throat.
“Show” a Character’s Emotional State	
Bob was scared.	Bob’s face was the color of ash, his eyes were opened wide, and his breathing came in ragged gasps.
“Show” a Character’s Personality through Dialogue	
Danny was arrogant and selfish.	<p>“Great pitching out there, Danny,” his mom said when Danny got in the car. Smiling, she patted his shoulder. “How does your arm feel?”</p> <p>He brushed her hand away. “It’s fine.” He grinned. “You should have seen Tommy’s face when Coach put me in for him.”</p> <p>“I did see his face.” She paused. “He seemed ... really disappointed. I guess he wanted to finish the game himself.”</p> <p>“Yeah, right, <i>finish</i> the game. Too bad Coach even let him <i>start</i>.” Danny’s mom winced at his words. “We’d be in the playoffs if he knew how to pitch. Hey, can we go to In N Out?”</p>
“Show” a Character’s Personality through Action	
Jessica felt afraid of the lawn mower, but she focused her attention and learned that she is strong enough to handle the machine with confidence.	<p>She took a deep breath and nudged the mower forward a few inches. It made a hideous <i>ccrrrunch</i> as it chewed up twigs and spat out the fragments. She shrieked, thinking of how “cute” she would look with missing toes. The mower kept roaring, and she realized that she didn’t know how to turn it off.</p> <p>“John!” she shouted, but there was no way he could hear her. She nudged the evil machine forward and watched the grass spew out the side. It was kind of cool. Terrifying, but cool.</p> <p>She kept pushing all the way to the other side of the lawn. The mower was heavy, but she was strong enough. Turning around was another issue. Still, she was tough, even if she liked pink. She pushed down on the handle, and the mower tilted up. Her tense muscles relaxed, and she let out a loud sigh. No longer muffled by the grass, the mower’s chainsaw roar increased to jackhammer level. Slowly, she turned, and then she pushed forward to mow the next strip of grass. The shaggy grass fell as she mowed. By the time she got to the end of the lawn, she had perfected the turning technique so that it was one fluid motion.</p> <p>No longer afraid of the mower, she moved her sweaty face closer to examine the controls. She found the switch and cut the engine.</p>

