

Frank's Writing Tips and Bachelor Cookbook:
“Show, Don't Tell”

Show, don't tell.

This a phrase that's handed out gratuitously to every student in high school English class during the week-long unit on fiction writing, and then subsequently pounded into the skulls of said students if they ever take an actual fiction writing class. Then when these students start asking for critiques on their writing, every critiquer in the universe tells them once again to do it. But these students can go years and years without ever actually learning what in the hell it's supposed to mean.

Okay... that may be an exaggeration. But let me tell you a little story about my first experiences with 'show, don't tell', and you can tell me if it's similar to your own.

The first time I heard of it was in middle school, actually (not high school). We were doing a unit on 'creative writing' in my seventh grade English class, I believe, which involved poetry and short fiction both. There were some half dozen rules that were posted up on the wall for us all to stare at every day of the unit, but of course I've long since forgotten what most of them were (obviously they were all very important to a fiction writer like myself). But I do recall one of them, which stated, simply, 'Show, don't tell'. We went through each bullet point at a time, doing little exercises, standing up and reading the results of our exercises out loud, receiving mild feedback (most of it positive, of course) from the teacher. Eventually, we got to 'show, don't tell', and began exercises on that.

Now, let me pause here a moment, for dramatic effect. If you continue on the writing path, and you continue to hear that phrase, contrary to what I stated in the introduction up there, you do eventually learn what it's supposed to mean. It's a little tough to understand completely, which is partly why I'm writing this, but eventually everyone who keeps going picks it up and figures it out and makes good use of it. Because it is a handy little rule in a lot of different situations. But if you're like me, you didn't actually learn about it in school. You learned the phrase, but you didn't learn about it. Here's what I mean.

The exercise we were told to do for that part of the class was the following: write a paragraph describing something (anything: a tree, a house, a room, a dog, an alien spaceship, whatever) using as many descriptive words as you can muster.

This requires perhaps another dramatic pause.

Now, if you know already about 'show, don't tell', you can understand immediately why what the teacher was having us do to exercise this useful idea was so horribly, immensely, disgustingly flawed. That was not 'show, don't tell'. That wasn't even *close* to 'show, don't tell'. What our teacher was having us do has a completely different name, and it's always considered something to be avoided at all costs. If you've never heard of it, it's a little something called 'purple prose', and it's so infamous it even has its own Wikipedia page.

Okay, so. Show, don't tell. If it's not writing ungodly descriptive passages using the most abhorrently flowery language your limited 7th grade imagination can muster, what, actually, is it?

Let's talk a little bit about movies for a minute. I'm not a film expert, of course, but from what I understand, film is kind of funny in that it's both a written and a visual medium. The written part, on the screen, is mostly the dialogue, but there are always a lot of scenes with no dialogue at all, whether they be action scenes or sweeping pans over landscapes or whatever. So, now imagine you're watching a movie, and one of the characters walks over to another character and says,

"I'm feeling sad right now."

That's kind of weird, isn't it? You'd probably inadvertently chuckle if you heard that, even if it wasn't a comedy you were watching. You're probably thinking there's a much more obvious and better way to get the information across that this character is sad than for him to just blatantly state it outright. Maybe have a scene where he cries, or something.

In other words, *show* his sadness, and don't *tell* the audience he's sad.

In essence, that's what the phrase is all about. I think the problem my 7th grade English teacher had, and the problem a lot of folks have when they first hear the phrase, is to misconstrue the meaning of the word 'show'. It may have something to do with the phrase itself, and how it sounds an awful lot like 'show and tell', that thing we all did in kindergarten where we brought our favorite stuffed animal to school and showed it to everyone and then told everyone about it. It has this connotation of displaying, like showing a picture or an object or whatever. Hence why the exercise in class was to just write a descriptive paragraph: show a picture of something in words. But that's something else, something complicated which is going to have to be the subject of another essay.

Showing in this context is more about the use of imagery to convey the story being told. As humans, we actually have a bit of an advantage in regard to doing this properly, because we all (or at least most) have an innate sense of how to read body language. I feel like that's a good way to think about this topic: using body language versus using speech.

Let's go back to our movie character. So, in a more proper movie, his sadness would be shown by him crying, perhaps, or by a very stoic facial expression, pained looks, slow movement, any number of things. Actors tend to win Oscars for this type of behavior on screen; the ability to move the audience deeply without saying one word. There's just something far more visceral about doing it this way, something more impactful. It plays off of our mutual sympathies as members of *homo sapiens sapiens*, goes right to the core of the emotional connection with a character.

Now, the nice thing is that we can do this in our fiction as well. Just because it's about imagery doesn't mean this technique is limited to the silver screen. Think about the previous example again, but this time imagine it's not in a movie, but in a story. Now, I seriously doubt most authors would actually write a piece of dialogue in which a character blatantly states his emotion (I think we all know without being told that this is a bad idea), but oftentimes I do see things like this:

He sat down and put his face in his hands, tears streaming down his cheeks. His heart ached with the sadness of the day's events, and it felt as though the only way to divest himself of the pain was through his agonizing sobs.

This is an example of telling. Now, first off, doing that in this particular way isn't always a terrible thing to do. Not really. In a lot of circles it's perfectly acceptable, because it is in fact a way of demonstrating his sadness in a mildly visceral way (in this case, through somewhat flowery language). But if you choose to write such a passage yourself, you may want to stop and ask, is that second sentence really necessary?

Think again about the movie. You see a scene wherein a man sits alone with his face buried in his hands, sobs wracking his chest. If you are, in fact, a normal human being, presumably that's all you need to see in order to understand what's going on. The filmmaker could, of course, slap down some background narration over this shot, but in terms of connecting with that character, of feeling his emotion (assuming he's a good actor), the narration would seem rather superfluous. In a lot of ways it's the same thing with fiction. Try this instead:

He sat down and put his face in his hands, tears streaming down his cheeks. The sound echoed from the otherwise silent walls, interrupted only by the steady ticking of a clock. As the light dimmed with the setting sun, he remained nearly motionless, the form only broken by the rising and falling of each breath.

So, nowhere in there do I explicitly say that this guy is sad, but you got that, right? Obviously you got that. Maybe you got a few other things, too, like the depth of his apparent depression (he sits there sobbing for a long time) and possibly his feeling of isolation (the room is silent but for a clock ticking). There might even be symbolism or some crap in there that I didn't think about when I wrote it just now. But you'll notice that I didn't mention any of those things in that little dumb passage explicitly. They are there, but they are not explicit. This is showing instead of telling.

So... okay. The question that may be on your mind now is a perfectly logical one: when should I show, and when should I tell? And to be perfectly honest, if there's a consistent and quantitative answer to that, I'm not aware of it. Unfortunately, this is often a problem we all run into with fiction, it being an artform and all. Sometimes you just have to feel things, and in order to be able to feel things, you have to have the feel for those things you're trying to feel. And lots of people would say that coming up with an algorithm for these ambiguous, sketchy things would make the whole attempt feel robotic and cold and therefore shouldn't be done. Showing and telling, in my opinion, fall into this category.

But I can attempt to explain it anyway, via the favorite tool of every theorist who's ever lived: reductionism. At the most basic level, you show when you want to allow the reader to imagine more, and you tell when you want to be more explicit.

Let's do another theorist thing and take an extreme example for demonstration purposes. I mentioned symbolism up there. Symbolism is the ultimate showing and not telling, because when you employ symbolism, you're basically refusing to tell the reader a damned thing, and you assume that he's a smart enough or learned enough fellow to figure it all out on his own and imagine the rest. A lot of famous works employ this technique, and in some part that's why they're so famous: they tell a story, but underneath that story, they leave all these trace hints of something deeper, something more important and more universal. So folks read these old books and they analyze them and they find all sorts of wonderful meanings in them. Moby Dick could symbolize the destructive power of obsession. The scarlett letter could symbolize original sin. Finny's embolism after breaking his leg a second time could symbolize Christian grace. None of these things are stated explicitly in the works in which they're found (some or all might not even have been intentionally placed there by the authors, but that's another story), but people have found them and they've found meaning in them and they've connected with them. The saw the man cry and understood that he was sad.

On the opposite end you have things like expository dialogue or narration. "Hey, friend! It sure is good to see you after us having been unwillingly separated from each other and our families by a great storm at sea!" So, okay, now you know those things. No question there. This is obviously a very functional way to get information across to the reader, and it serves its purpose when that's all you feel the need to do. The house had a clay-tiled roof and green siding, with flower boxes in each of the five second-floor windows. He had a scar on his left arm that looked like New Jersey. The fur on the deer's face was unusually orange. There are sometimes more interesting ways to get this type of information out there, of course, but no matter how you do it, it's still basically telling.

So, given that, the choice is really yours regarding when to use either one of these techniques. Like I said, I don't know of any particular universal rule regarding their usage, and in some ways I feel there shouldn't be one. But at least that should give you a stepping off point if you find yourself struggling with the concept.

In conclusion... is there a conclusion? The conclusion, I suppose, is that you shouldn't ever listen to your 7th grade English teacher.

Recipe #3: Frank's Quite Fancy-Looking Potato and Apple Soup

Preparation time, roughly 45 minutes

Ingredients:

- 2 large red potatoes or equivalent weight of small potatoes
- 1/4 medium-sized onion (red may be best here)
- 1 apple (I find gala to be the most appropriate, but feel free to experiment)
- Some water
- ~1 tablespoon of some kind of oil

Quite a bit of black pepper
Some soy sauce
Some Worcestershire sauce

Heat the oil in a pot, medium heat. Chop the potatoes into modestly-sizeable chunks, and do the same for the onion. Throw these into the pot with the now modestly hot oil and stir around to coat. Let them cook for a wee bit (say, two minutes). Once the onions start to get a little clear, pour enough water over the potatoes and onions to just barely submerge them all. Shake some soy sauce into the pot, and then shake some Worcestershire sauce into the pot (use more Worcestershire sauce than soy, but try not to use too much of either). Then shake a bunch of pepper in there and stir it around. Turn heat to high to get it all boiling. In the meantime, core and slice the apple (leave the skins on unless you're a pussy). Once the water's boiling, turn the heat down to medium and let it do that for around 30 minutes. When the potatoes are soft, take the pot off the heat and let it cool a bit. Then throw the apples on top and serve immediately.

Serves 1 or 2. IMPORTANT NOTICE: eat it all right away, because if you try it as leftovers the next day, the apples will have become weird and mushy and soggy and absolutely flavorless. On that note, it's extremely important that you throw them on after the soup has had a chance to cool a bit. Probably best used as a side-dish, as even if you eat the whole pot yourself, you'll feel hungry again in about an hour. You could probably dip French bread in it too, or some shit. I don't know. Whatever.