

Showing Vs. Telling- A Tutorial

A common critique of authors who are just starting out is that they rely too much on "telling" rather than "showing."

For my part, it took me a long time to be able to apply this advice but when I did, it made an immense improvement in my work. I'm sharing this for the benefit of other writers who may have had trouble grasping what "showing vs. telling" means and how to apply it to a given scene.

What you do when you shift the emphasis from "telling" a scene through narration to "showing" a scene through action and dialogue is basically taking your story from "once upon a time" to "real time," changing it from a tedious history lesson of how the characters got to the current situation to an active scene that develops as they read along. It's like the difference between being told that an event happened and watching the event happen right before your eyes.

Sometimes, you will need narration. Sometimes you need just a bit of backstory dump or setup to make a scene work, or some narration to skip over the boring parts of a long conversation that covers what you already know. Narration can fill in wherever narration, text, or a segway to the next scene might be used in a well-directed film. But wherever a scene would play out in real time on a movie screen, it makes more sense to follow the same approach when you write.

Below are two examples from one of my upcoming novels, "The Linen Butterfly."

Draft 1- *Too much "telling." Exposition driven primarily by narration. While it gets the job done, it makes for a scene where too much text is involved in setting up the scene rather than letting it evolve organically through the actions and dialogue of the characters. The overall tone becomes passive and a bit laborious, and presents the scene to the reader as an event that happened "once upon a time."*

Back in Genetta, Virgil Dol's forces had encountered an unexpected problem.

They had expected the entire city of Genetta to be unguarded, with no one around to rally the guards in time to save it from being captured easily by a force of several hundred soldiers.

Instead, the few hundred soldiers stood face to face with about a thousand of the king's own highly-trained fighters.

Leading them was Sir Bilik Ghravar, a badger. He was known to be fiercely loyal to King Brannagh, and talking him into surrender when he had them outnumbered was out of the question.

This didn't stop Tures and Kel from attempting to parley.

They rode forward to meet each other on a field just outside of Genetta.

"What is your business here?" asked Sir Bilik.

"I have come to collect the Barony of Greater Vulpes for the glory of Duke Cassius, liege of Vulpesia, as granted in this deed from Duke Virgil, liege of The Goldenlea. This land belongs to my liege now," Kel said, holding a scroll forward in his hand.

Draft 2- *Exposition by "telling" becomes exposition through "showing," where the characters reveal relevant information through dialogue. The result engages the reader more, making the exposition dynamic and interesting and greatly improving the pace of the scene, allowing it to play out in "real time" rather than making the reader process it as an event that happened "once upon a time."*

Back in Genetta, Virgil Dol's forces had encountered an unexpected problem.

"I thought Virgil said they would be unguarded," Kel Fairpelt whispered to Tures Wahar. "How many of them do you think there are?"

"A few hundred, maybe up to a thousand," Tures replied, his thick tail thumping nervously against the haunches of his flatback as a badger astride a gray flatback rode out of the gates toward them. "But not many more."

"So it's not so bad?" Kel asked.

"No, it's definitely bad. That badger riding out of the gates is Sir Bilik Ghravar, he's one of my cousin's favorite strongarm creatures. If he's here, then the whole kingdom knows about our plans. He's the last creature I wanted to see here."

"Should we even attempt to parley, then?" Kel asked. "Sounds like we've got a siege on our hands either way."

"Virgil will have our hides if we don't try to parley," Tures replied.

They rode forward to meet each other at a spot about two hundred yards from the gates of Genetta.

"What is your business here?" asked Sir Bilik.

"I have come to collect the Barony of Greater Vulpes for the glory of Duke Cassius, liege of Vulpesia, as granted in this deed from Duke Virgil, liege of The Goldenlea. This land belongs to my liege now," Kel said, holding a scroll forward in his hand.