Telling and Showing

The Difference between Telling and Showing

- The room was stifling hot and exhausting.
- Within seconds of entering the room beads formed on her brow and then perspiration turned a crisp blouse soggy. Cobwebs draping the gap at the top of the window didn’t flutter. She fanned herself with a magazine, but that was too tiring as if the air resisted like molasses.

Both of the above provide information, but the first is sparse and does little to stimulate the reader’s imagination or encourage a greater emotional response. Telling is analogous to a newspaper headline without the text and pictures below it.

The showing example uses language to add drama and facilitate the reader imagining in far greater and more precise detail, which in turn evokes a stronger emotional response. Showing can also be aided by dialogue, thoughts and a well developed point of view.

Good writers don’t limit their creativity to showing. If anything, the sparseness of telling means that it benefits from appearing fresh and different.

Oversold Advice

“Show don’t tell” is among the most common advice offered to people engaged in creative writing. Sometimes these words sounds like a rule, which would be silly because telling has its uses and not least in short stories with their tighter word budgets. Both styles of writing have advantages. The reason that “show don’t tell” is often oversold is that misuse of telling can make text very clunky. However, overly dramatic showing or excessive details can also make a story less readable.

What an author needs to do when reviewing a draft is:
- identify the style in parts of the story, e.g. each paragraph
- consider the balance between telling and showing across the whole story
- make informed choices in terms of what they want the reader to experience

The Detail Continuum

The four pieces below convey the same basic message with increasing levels of detail. All might fit well in a story depending on how much information is needed for a particular passage, the relationship with themes and other images used, and how it contributes to the totality of the story.

1) The apple blossom made him happy. He rested against the trunk.

2) The apple tree was laden with blossom that reminded him of good times. He sat with his back against the trunk.

3) A mature apple tree had a mass of white blossom that largely hid the unfurling leaves. He sat on the earth with the trunk supporting his back and recalled with smiles other fruit trees and activities enjoyed beneath and beside them.
4) Dominating his host’s back garden was a blooming apple tree with branches that began where no adult could easily reach. As the ground was dry, he couldn’t resist sitting with his back against the solid grey-brown trunk, vertebrae slightly to one side so they were not hard against the bark. Above was a giant umbrella with hints of green from unfurling leaves amid the mass of white with hints of pink; as if a tiny brush had dabbed rouge to the base of each petal. He recalled the exhilaration of hide-and-seek in his parents’ orchard, a bonfire of prunings there made more exciting by holding a sparkler, and his first romantic kiss under branches bowed earthwards by fruit that had not just the colour of gold but also, it had appeared, the weight of that metal.

While it is useful to ask the relevance and contribution to the story of everything we write, something as stark as 1) or even 2) should prompt the question, Does the story benefit from all or any of this information? The answer might be to whittle down or eliminate. Or you might decide more detail is warranted.

And for 3) and 4) the question might be, Is this level of detail adding enough to the story to justify the number of words used?

Significance within the story as a whole should be the guide. E.g. in 4),
- How useful is it to know to whom the garden belongs?
- Why spend so much time describing the tree and its blossom?
- What does bringing in three different memories of childhood add, if anything?

Engaging Senses

Readers tolerate or don’t notice telling when most of the story draws them in. One of the most important ways of doing this is to make it easy for the reader to conjure up sights (including people, places and action), sounds (including conversations and the tone of these), tastes, smells and feelings.

Feelings include what our skin registers (e.g. texture, temperature, moistness), what our inner ear detects (dizziness, balance, movement), proprioception (awareness of joints flexing or being held in a position), visceral sensations (heart, lungs and digestive tract), pain and discomfort, and emotions. Often emotions are experienced in large measure through the other types of feeling.

Don’t assume that the way you experience / identify an emotion you are feeling is universal; differences might be linked to gender and culture. And some people are more aware of the physical components signifying an emotion whereas others live more in their heads.

Stimulating the Reader’s Imagination is also Helped by

a. Describing impact of emotions rather than naming them. E.g. not Jim felt depressed, but Jim had little appetite and when he did eat food gave him no pleasure. In fact, none of the things that had comforted him in the past did that.
b. Restricting the use of passive verbs, identifying the agent and limiting the use of the verb to be (is, are, was, were etc.). E.g.

Prizes were distributed at the end of year assembly.
The head teacher handed out prizes at the end of year assembly.

The car repair should be completed by midnight.
The mechanic promised to do all he could to fix the car by midnight.

She is a popular girl.
Her classmates enjoy spending time with her.

c. Favouring verbs with more specific meanings. E.g.

Instead of run - sprinted, lollopped or scuttled.
Instead of like - admire, revere or fancy.
Instead of question - probe, cross-examine or pry.

d. Using dialogue - perhaps with speech marks - rather than summarising what was said.

e. Describing what appears or unfolds before a character. When action happens, ask if the writing will enable the reader to imagine it happening in front of her or him?

f. Drawing less attention to the narrator, e.g. by avoiding asides.

g. Writing thoughts as reported speech rather than a summary of them. Often italics indicate such thinking. However, beware of overdoing this as excessive interior monologues can make a story leaden.

h. Minimize use of adverbs or replace them with more descriptive phrases. E.g. 
   Instead of He spoke softly.  
   His voice was soft as if he didn’t want me to hear him.

i. Avoid vague adjectives.  
   She was pretty and intelligent.  
   What features or behaviour made her appear pretty / intelligent?

j. Be filmic. Unless a film has a narrator or uses actors talking about a past event, it depends on showing. How could a scene from your short story be conveyed on screen? What would the camera see and the microphone pick up? How could the viewers detect the moods of the characters? What other details would the camera / microphone linger on? But your task is to write a short story, not a film script.

k. Getting to the heart of the story rather than having a preamble. A joke is not funnier because someone says it will be. The same is true of stories, be it a promise of humour, excitement, tragedy or another quality. Let stories stand or fall their merits without explicitly saying what the genre is or the expected reader
**Telling and Showing**

response. The tone of the writing and possibly the title should be enough to convey this is a tale about horror / love / crime / etc.

**Some Reasons for Using Telling / Less Description**

a. Not everything a character does or experiences will have interest for the reader. Stories seldom need details of commonplace activities except perhaps when banality is a theme or to portray a character is obsessive or quirky. E.g., we all know about brushing teeth and would appreciate a description of this only when the activity has some larger significance within a story. In most cases, if mentioning cleaning teeth, telling is all that is needed.

b. When listing the components of an action would add little or nothing to the story. E.g.
   - He dashed off a letter. *Rather than*
   - He sat on the chair by his desk, pulled back his cuffs to keep them clean, took out a pad of paper, selected a pen with blue ink and wrote a letter as quickly as he could while maintaining legibility.

c. Telling might be used to speed up the pace at which the story unfolds or to link two longer descriptive pieces.

d. Telling might be used to clarify after a lot of complex detail. Or to ensure there is no ambiguity about a crucial detail.

e. Telling might be used to convey the nature of a character, e.g. someone who is terse or unimaginative.

f. Telling might be used to reflect events unfolding very quickly.

g. Telling might be better suited than showing for conveying ideas. E.g. in a story that involves less common religious or philosophical beliefs telling might be used to set the scene and showing used to demonstrate what these beliefs inspire in terms of behaviour.

Those interested in the history of these concepts in literature theory will find a useful summary in the first part of a 2013 article, *Further Remarks on Showing and Telling* by Sarah Kozlof. [www.ocec.eu/cinemacomparativecinema/pdf/ccc03/ccc03_articulos_kozloff_eng.pdf](www.ocec.eu/cinemacomparativecinema/pdf/ccc03/ccc03_articulos_kozloff_eng.pdf)

“When describing nature, a writer should seize upon small details, arranging them so that the reader will see an image in his mind after he closes his eyes. For instance: you will capture the truth of a moonlit night if you'll write that a gleam like starlight shone from the pieces of a broken bottle, and then the dark, plump shadow of a dog or wolf appeared. You will bring life to nature only if you don't shrink from similes that liken its activities to those of humankind.” — Anton Chekhov

“Needless to say, many great novelists combine "dramatic" showing with long sections of the flat-out authorial narration that is, I guess, what is meant by telling. And the warning against telling leads to a confusion that causes novice writers to think that everything should be acted out - don't tell us a character is happy, show us how she screams "yay" and jumps up and down for joy - when in fact the responsibility of showing should be assumed by the energetic and specific use of language.” — Francine Prose