



## SUBSTANTIVE EDITING FOR FICTION 201

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### LESSON #3

#### **Telling and Showing**

Have you ever listened to someone tell someone else's story? It can be entertaining, but oftentimes the story feels flat as Bob tries to convey to you how Jim felt in a certain situation. When Jim tells the story, however, he includes details that Bob didn't know, and he emphasizes the parts that impacted him. When Bob tells it, he can give only superficial explanations. When Jim tells it, he recreates the experience. Bob tells the story. Jim can show it.

Essentially, that's the difference between telling and showing.

If you've been editing for any length of time, I'm sure you've heard "show, don't tell" (and if you haven't heard it yet, just wait—you will). That's because showing a scene allows the reader to step into the mind of the POV character and experience everything as he or she experiences it. When you tell the story, you keep the reader at arm's length. You're passing along information without experiencing any of it. (See SEF 101, Lesson 2, for a POV refresher.)

When you encounter telling in your authors' manuscripts, you'll want to point it out and suggest ways to show. Showing will strengthen the story (which will increase your author's chances of signing that contract). It won't be your job to rewrite telling as showing, but every now and then it helps to offer examples and suggestions.

In this lesson, we're going to learn to identify and fix different types of telling. You'll learn the following:

- The Difference between Telling and Showing
- Identifying Different Types of Telling, including:
  - Backstory
  - Info Dumps
  - Overexplaining
  - Weasel Words
- Passive Voice
- When to Tell and What Not to Do

## The Difference between Telling and Showing

As I mentioned earlier, the difference between showing and telling boils down to whether or not the story engages the reader or simply passes along the details. More than that, however, is the issue that telling doesn't allow the reader to interpret the story—telling literally tells the reader what to think and feel and when to do it. Instead, the goal is to show a story and let the readers experience it in their own way.

To help illustrate this, I'll give several examples of telling, explain why it's telling, then demonstrate how they can be changed to showing.

### Example #1

This scene is in the point of view of the judge (the man who sits down). This is what the author wrote:

Sitting down, he looked proudly at the two women who had brought so much joy in his life. His daughter, Dr. Kathryn Mary Piper, known as Katy to everyone in Beaumont, and Susan Wright, the Assistant District Attorney for Beaumont County who played a large role in his life.

How is it telling?

1. Here the author is telling you the judge is proud without showing you. Instead of describing his relationship with the girls, he says he's proud. There's no other way to interpret the scene.
2. When most people sit down to talk with family or friends, they don't think to themselves, "This is my wife, Karin. She's an influential person in my life. I'm so happy to know her." You simply sit down and start talking. All the information about Katy and Susan is being told to readers without letting them discover it for themselves.

Suggested revision:

Sitting down, the judge's chest swelled with emotion as he smiled at his daughter and her best friend. "Katy, Susan. How are two of my favorite people today?"

Observation:

There's a *lot* of information missing, and that's okay. There will be other times and places to show those details. The author doesn't have to reveal everything at once.

### Example #2

“Go ahead,” he said, using his official tone.

How is it telling?

The author is telling you what the tone sounded like. Instead, show how his voice changed and let the reader decide what it sounded like.

Suggested revision:

He cleared his throat. “Go ahead,” he said, his voice deep and his smile gone.

In the revision, the author shows what happens in the scene and lets the readers interpret it for themselves.

### Example #3

From the point of view of the boy on the porch:

She opened the door and smiled.  
He smiled back. She looked beautiful.

How is it telling?

Saying “she looked beautiful” shows nothing about the character, not to mention that beautiful means different things to different people. One reader might envision a goth princess while someone else pictures Victorian lace. Instead of telling the reader that the boy thought the girl was beautiful, show what she looks like and let his response show the reader what he thinks.

Suggested revision:

She opened the door and smiled.  
Gone were the cowboy boots, jeans, and her brother’s too-big, hand-me-down shirt. The blue dress and black heels accentuated every feminine curve. And her hair! He’d never seen it out of a ponytail, but it fell like a curtain around her shoulders. He lost his breath as he smiled back. “H-Hi.”

In the revision, the reader sees what the character sees and feels his response. Unlike the first example (where the original section was shortened by cutting unnecessary telling), the third example lengthens the original piece as the author shows the interaction instead of simply telling about it.

## Identifying Different Types of Telling

Authors find all kinds of ways to put telling into their novels. It's nice to be able to identify these types of telling so you can be more specific in your edits and suggestions. The three types we're going to focus on are backstory, info dumps, and weasel words.

### Backstory

Backstory is when the author explains what happened in the past to lead the characters to their current situations.

It's common for new writers to compose chapters full of backstory before they get to the heart of the novel (I cut the first five chapters from my first novel). These authors want to make sure the reader understands everything that's happened up to the inciting incident so the reader knows the characters' motivations, but chapters of setup aren't the way to do that. While it's true that the author needs to know everything about the characters' lives, the reader doesn't, and most of that information should never make it into the novel.

There are three main reasons why authors need to avoid backstory:

1. **The information isn't relevant.** Bill's fifth-grade basketball coach may have been a big influence on why he chose to become an engineer, but unless that coach comes back as a main character in Bill's adult life, that information doesn't need to be in the novel.
2. **Too many details are hard to remember.** When you start talking about Bill's college roommates Steve and Paul, his childhood friend Kyle, and the neighborhood crew of Wayne, Todd, and Jim, you suddenly have a large cast of characters that the reader is trying to remember. Plus, the reader's trying to remember the details about each character. Soon your reader is overwhelmed with people and relationships that may or may not have anything to do with the plot.
3. **It interrupts the story.** More often than not, authors drop backstory into the middle of a scene. One minute readers are watching Bill and Sue argue, then suddenly they're back in Bill's childhood when his parents used to fight, and he remembers that he never wanted to fight with his wife, and he never fought with a girlfriend until he and Sue got married, and now he's not prepared. Whoa. What happened to the scene? The author pulled the readers out of it to explain Bill's reaction to Sue.

Here are some examples of how backstory can interrupt a scene:

As the Colonel hung up the phone, the juvenile detention center's bell rang. Everyone called her the Colonel, even though the name was not directly tied to her job. It was a nickname she had been given as a child. She had blonde curls then and a fiery disposition, and she reminded her father of Shirley Temple in *The Littlest Colonel*. But once she started to grow, "little" didn't belong anymore. At five foot eleven, she was anything but little. Regardless, the title Colonel survived.

“Come in,” she said.

The scene starts by introducing the reader to a character and setting—the Colonel at the juvenile detention center. But then, instead of staying in the scene and showing the Colonel responding to the ringing bell, you get an explanation of her nickname. It stops the scene. There are two ways to handle something like this.

1. **Decide if it’s relevant to the story.** In this novel, it turned out that the nickname didn’t matter. The Colonel was a minor character who never made another appearance. In that case, cut the explanation. It’s easier and less complicated to simply name the character and refer to her position.
2. **Find a way to reveal the information within the context of the story.** If the Colonel had been a major character, and the nickname played an important part in the story, there are other ways to reveal the important information. An effective tool is “the dumb puppet.” The dumb puppet is a character who comes into a scene and asks questions as a way for the main character to reveal important information.

In the case of the information being irrelevant, the scene could be rewritten like this:

As Warden Miller hung up the phone, the juvenile detention center’s bell rang.

“Come in,” she said.

If you need to keep the information, try the dumb puppet:

As the Colonel hung up the phone, the juvenile detention center’s bell rang.

“Come in,” she said. In stepped a young woman with wild red hair, freckles, and green eyes that sparkled. “Sit down, Ginger. How are you today?”

Ginger sat in the padded seat across from her. “I’m okay. Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“Were you really a colonel in the army?”

And there is the perfect opportunity for the author to reveal more about a main character without having to stop the forward motion with backstory.

### *Info Dumps*

Similar to backstory, info dumps are large sections of information dropped into a novel. Unlike backstory, the information isn’t necessarily from the characters’ past. An info dump is any

section of writing that stops the action to provide information (all instances of backstory are info dumps, but not all info dumps are backstory).

Here's an example of an info dump:

“If the death certificate was authorized by a qualified medical professional, this looks like an open and shut case,” said Jack.

“It would be, if the Lieutenant's last name wasn't Mason.”

Daughter of Albert Mason, the well-known owner of the *Salt Lake Journal* and one of Utah's most influential and powerful men. Everyone read the journal, including Senator Max Stimson, who happens to be chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee.

“When Senator Stimson shakes the chain, we jump.”

The paragraph about Albert Mason and Senator Stimson isn't written as a character's thoughts or dialogue; it's just put in there to provide information. That information is important, as it's the motivation for the entire investigation, so it needs to stay in the book. It can be shown, however, using the dumb puppet.

“If the death certificate was authorized by a qualified medical professional, this looks like an open and shut case,” said Jack.

“It would be, if the Lieutenant's last name wasn't Mason.”

“Sir?”

“As in daughter of Albert Mason, owner of the *Salt Lake Journal* and one of Utah's most influential and powerful men. Everyone reads the journal, including Senator Max Stimson, who happens to be chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee. Mason called the senator, and when Senator Stimson shakes the chain, we jump.”

Voilà. Shown, not told.

### **Overexplaining**

RUE—Resist the Urge to Explain

Authors like to make sure their readers get every hint and understand every detail of their stories, so they tend to over explain. It can be something as small as the day's weather or as large as a major plot point. It's not as easy to demonstrate some of the plot-point over explanations, but I'll do my best to help you understand and recognize these sections.

First, the small explanations:

Ben hung up the phone. The conversation was over.

As a rule of thumb, people hang up the phone because their conversations are over. There's no reason to tell the readers that the conversation is over; they'll figure it out because Ben hung up. That's not anything unusual. If it *was* something unusual—if Ben hung up in the middle of the conversation—that would be worth mentioning. Otherwise, it's not needed. If you have an author who's trying to cut words, that second sentence (and others like them) can be removed.

Here's an example of a larger section of over-explanation. To understand it, I need to explain what's already happened in the story.

The story opens with the judge and human services department finding a home for young women aging out of juvenile detention. They were making progress in their rehabilitation, so arrangements are made for the girls to stay with a local couple. The judge and social worker have explained everything to the couple, and it's now the day before the girls move in. The wife and her mother are having coffee.

Mabel stood there stirring in her cream and sugar. She looked at her daughter. "These girls are going to want answers. You'll be providing them a home, food, clothes, companionship, and, ultimately, love because that is who you are, Leslie. Each of these girls will come to you with her own story. You'll need to listen, support, and encourage them. You'll need to be a second mother to them."

At this point in the story, however, this has already been explained to Leslie by the judge and the social worker. Having her mother repeat it doesn't add anything to the story. It's simply a case of an author wanting to make sure the reader knows exactly what's going to happen, but it's not needed. That section can (and should) be cut.

RUE

### *Weasel Words*

Also called telling words, these are the words that tell what's going on. They aren't needed as they're merely explaining what's about to happen. For example, there's no need to write "she smelled bacon." Just describe what the bacon smelled like. Instead of saying "he heard the door slam," just say that the door slammed.

Other examples:

She walked outside and watched the beautiful sunset.

He sat on the couch because he felt tired.

He ran outside. He wondered if it was going to rain.

She reread the acceptance letter. She'd be going to Harvard. She was so happy.

Instead, show what the characters are experiencing.

She walked outside. Orange, pink, and red streaked across the sky as the sun sank below the horizon.

He sat on the couch, his arms and legs heavy with exhaustion. He might never move again.

He ran outside. A ceiling of gray clouds stretched as far as he could see. Would it finally rain?

She reread the acceptance letter. She'd be going to Harvard. Tears filled her eyes as she jumped up and down, squealing and laughing.

In the first versions, the reader is told what to think about what the characters are experiencing. In the second versions, the reader sees and experiences everything the way the characters do so they can come to their own conclusions about what happened.

Here's a list of some of the most common weasel words:

- looked
- felt
- heard
- tasted
- sad
- mad
- thought
- knew
- appeared

A good rule to remember: Don't name the emotion—show it! Don't tell the reader what sense is being used—show it!

## Passive Voice

There are two voices in writing: active and passive. In active voice, the subject of the sentence does something (it's active). In passive voice, the subject of the sentences has something done to it (it's passive). Active voice does what it says—it keeps the scene active and moving. It's the

preferred voice, not only in fiction, but in most writing.

Here are some examples.

### Passive

The wall was hit by a car.

Tears were spilled by Angela.

It was determined by the school board that the principal should be suspended.

### Active

The car hit the wall.

Angela cried.

The school board decided to suspend the principal.

You'll notice that all the examples of passive voice include a *to be* verb (*was, were*). When you see *to-be* verbs, pay close attention; there may be passive voice involved.

## **When to Tell and What Not to Do**

Believe it or not, sometimes telling is acceptable. It just depends on what's happening in the scene.

Imagine you're editing a thriller, and the heroine realizes she's being followed. She needs to leave town immediately. The pacing of the plot matters, so you don't want to slow it down with unnecessary details. Imagine if the scene included these descriptions:

She packed her suitcase, grabbed her purse, and ran to her car. Once inside, she started the car and threw it into reverse. Pulling out of the driveway, she turned left toward the freeway on-ramp. She drove past pastures and farmhouses, resisting the urge to wave at people she knew. Ten miles later she pulled her car onto the freeway and out of town.

All of that showing slows down the action. In those situations, it's okay to say

She packed her suitcase, grabbed her purse, and ran to her car. In less than ten minutes she was out of town and on the freeway.

There's not a lot of detail, and you're telling the reader how much time passed. But it works in that scenario because the pacing of that scene is more important than the details. Telling worked, which leads to my next point ... what not to do.

**Don't edit out telling words or passive voice without considering the context.** As I mentioned before, there will be times when telling works because the reader doesn't care about how the character gets out of town; the reader only needs to see the character leaving town. If it works in the scene, leave it.

**Don't "search and destroy" weasel words.** I once had an editor mark every use of the word *looked* as telling, but she was wrong. *Looked* can be used two ways:

She looked good.

In that case, it's telling because the reader can't see what the character looks like. Instead, the author should describe the character's appearance.

She looked left.

That is *not* telling. The only other way to write that sentence would be something like *The muscles on one side of her neck contracted as the opposite muscles relaxed, causing her head to pivot to the left, which moved her line of sight to the left.* That would be awkward and confusing.

You want to be alert whenever you see weasel words or *to be* verbs, but their existence does not represent wrong writing.

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## **LESSON #3 ASSIGNMENTS**

*You will need to complete both assignments to qualify for the Certificate of Completion.*

### **Assignment #1**

Are the following sentences showing or telling? Do you see active or passive voice? (Hint: not all telling sentences are passive voice.) Rewrite at least four sentences for practice (though you're welcome to rewrite them all!).

1. Father's deepest desire for me was that I join the Navy.
2. The old man was short.
3. Excitedly, she ran down the street.
4. The chair felt rough.
5. Sue petted the dog carefully.
6. "I can't believe you forgot my gift," she said in disbelief.
7. The sudden ring of the alarm clock caused him to jump.
8. Excitedly, she ran home to tell her father the good news.
9. She threw the electric bill at him angrily.
10. She was a nice lady. And pretty too.
11. There was no one at the office.
12. Bill walked through the park toward the old, ancient house.
13. He couldn't believe she was being so calm about the whole thing.

### **Assignment #2**

Look for telling and passive voice in this section. Suggest ways to strengthen the writing.

"Hey, I'm home!" Addie yelled. She dropped her bags and recomposed herself. She smiled with the excitement of seeing her family. Bea rushed out of the kitchen and hugged her middle daughter fiercely. A shorter, grayer version of Addie, she hoped to look as good as her mother someday.

"Have you eaten yet?" Bea asked.

"I'm starving," Addie said.

"Dad's outside grilling now. Hal!" Bea called through the living room. As her mom returned to the kitchen, Addie smiled. Then she began hauling her things up to her room. She'd see her dad soon. Leaving his post unattended was never an option for a grill master such as Hal. As she suspected, he called inside a few moments later, but he wouldn't even open the sliding glass door to step inside.

"Hey, honey! I'm outside. I can't come in just yet. Come on and see me when you put your stuff away."

Addie chuckled. Hal ran a tight ship. Everything had its place. He allotted no time for transition or settling in. If Addie brought something home, it needed to go to her room immediately.

After her first semester break at college, Hal had warned her that she would need to make

sure everything found its place promptly. As she brought little home mid-year, she handled it easily. However, at the end of that year, with all of her belongings to haul upstairs, Addie had decided to crash early and take care of things in the morning. To her horror, and then amusement, she awoke at 10 am the following morning to find every last box of her belongings scattered across the backyard. Hal made his point. It never happened again.

Addie grabbed her bags, heaving them through the foyer and up the stairs. Four closed doors met her at the top. Skipping the bathroom and her sister's rooms, Addie opened to door to her right. She inhaled the welcome atmosphere of her childhood room. No ghosts there. Though she wanted to enjoy the cheery comforts, she also wanted to get settled. She hustled back to her car.