

**WHY YOU NEED
TO
SHOW AND TELL**



SHOWING

- SHOWING: The American Heritage Dictionary defines "to show" as "to cause or allow to be seen." In literature, "showing" is also referred to as dramatizing. If something is shown or dramatized, the reader is allowed to be an eyewitness (of sorts) to the events of the story, novel, or essay through dialogue (what characters say) and action (what characters do or have done to them).
- Another way to think of showing is to consider what can be performed in a *dramatic* genre, such as the stage, television, or movies. Indeed, the definition of "dramatize" is "to be adaptable to dramatic form."

TELLING

- Also referred to as a summary or narration, writers *tell* to directly communicate or describe to the reader what is happening in a creative work. That is, as a writer you can describe the setting (it was a dark and stormy night); you can describe the characters (she had a face as broad and as innocent as a cabbage); and you can even "tell" the plot by summarizing what happens at a particular point in the story, novel, or nonfiction piece (she told him she'd had enough, and that she was leaving for Peoria on the morning train.)

TO BE EVEN MORE PRECISE



When a story, novel, or essay is dramatized, or shown, the reader is presented with concrete evidence of what's happening.



Think of anything you could witness in the real world (a couple fighting in a restaurant), or on a stage or in a movie:



Words spoken, or dialogue between characters (LaPlante, p. 205).



Actions and reactions among characters.



Basic objective descriptions of objects or setting that a reader would naturally see if the situation were videotaped or photographed.

TELLING



History, or background information that supplements our knowledge of what's currently happening in the story, novel, or creative nonfiction piece.



Explanations or definitions to clarify whatever things are currently happening in the story.



Specific thoughts or emotions of the characters involved.



Any analysis or commentary on what is happening in the story.

WHY "SHOW, DON'T TELL" IS SUCH COMMON ADVICE

- Has the "clock" of the story been stopped for any reason?
- This is a sign of "telling."
- It is the equivalent of the aside used in theatre, or a time out in a sports event: the action needs to cease temporarily for other information to be presented.



HOW DO YOU DETERMINE WHAT IS SHOWING AND WHAT IS TELLING?

- Is it something you could witness for yourself without any help from the author? Then it is showing.
- Is the information being filtered or interpreted to push you toward a conclusion or emotional reaction that otherwise you might not have? That's telling.

TRADITIONAL USE OF NARRATIVE (TELLING)

- So, how do you choose when to show, and when to tell?
- Traditionally, it's been assumed that you want to show the important stuff. Important behaviors, important interactions, important speeches, conversations.
- Anything that changes the situation of the story in a significant way should happen in the "eyewitness" mode.
- LePlante page 213, second paragraph.
- Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants" is telling (213)



WHEN IS NARRATION USED?

- Narration is used to "set a scene" or prepare the reader for what will shortly be shown.
- Narration is used to provide important information that would be difficult or awkward to dramatize in the existing context. (The train from Barcelona was due in forty minutes.) This can include background, history, facts, or thoughts or emotions that a character would not be able to express using the spoken word.

**WHY NARRATION
IS SUCH AN
IMPORTANT
CREATIVE TOOL**

- What we tell shouldn't echo what we show.
- When a section of "telling" can be eliminated without taking away from a creative work's meaning, then by all means cut it, and allow the showing to carry the piece.
- The opposite is true: often we can tell something more efficiently, elegantly, beautifully, or subtly than we can hope to do if we are dramatizing it. In which case, we should eliminate showing for telling.

**SO WHY DO
TEACHERS SAY
SHOW, DON'T
TELL?**

- Because good telling is hard to do.
- Good telling requires concrete and specific writing.
- Pages 225-226 handout