

Never Explain or Describe Character Thoughts

The Source

This is the extreme conclusion of "show don't tell" - the idea that all internal states must be externalized through action and dialogue, never stated directly.

It gained traction through misreading of Hemingway's iceberg theory: "If a writer knows enough about what he is writing about, he may omit things that he knows. The dignity of movement of an iceberg is due to only one-ninth of it being above water."

Gordon Lish's minimalist editing of Raymond Carver amplified this - cutting internal exposition, leaving only action and dialogue. The Lish-edited stories became models of extreme minimalism.

David Lodge's *The Art of Fiction* (1992) discussed "free indirect discourse" as the modern solution - thoughts rendered as if spoken aloud in character's voice, not directly explained.

The principle had merit: **Indirect presentation of consciousness can be more powerful than direct statement.**

The Morphing

This became increasingly rigid:

1. **Original:** "Render thought through voice and action when possible"
2. **First corruption:** "Don't tell us thoughts, show them through behavior"
3. **Second corruption:** "Never use 'he thought' or 'she felt'"
4. **Third corruption:** "All internal states must be externalized"
5. **Final form:** "Characters can never think directly on the page"

The rule became: **Delete any sentence that directly states what a character thinks or feels. Replace with action or implication.**

This led to fiction that treats interiority as error and eliminates one of fiction's primary advantages over film - direct access to consciousness.

The Reality

Great fiction is full of directly stated thoughts:

Virginia Woolf (all novels): Pages of direct thought. *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* are built on transparent consciousness - we're inside characters' heads, experiencing their thoughts directly.

Fyodor Dostoevsky (*Crime and Punishment*): Direct access to Raskolnikov's feverish consciousness. We experience his thoughts, rationalizations, and mental unraveling directly.

James Joyce (*Ulysses*): Stream of consciousness that IS direct thought - no filtering through action or implication.

Ian McEwan (*Atonement*): "Briony knew she was entering the world of adult complexity" - direct statement of understanding. The novel is full of such direct access to consciousness.

Hilary Mantel (*Wolf Hall*): "He thinks..." appears constantly. We're given direct access to Cromwell's calculations, memories, and assessments.

George Eliot (*Middlemarch*): Direct narration of character thoughts and feelings throughout. "Dorothea felt a pang at the thought..." - stating feeling directly, not showing it through action.

Marilynne Robinson (*Gilead*): Entire novel of John Ames's direct thoughts in letter form.

When Direct Thought Works

Direct access to consciousness succeeds when:

1. **Character psychology is complex:** Direct access shows nuanced thinking
2. **Internal conflict matters:** We need to see competing impulses
3. **Style is introspective:** Literary fiction focused on consciousness
4. **Thoughts are interesting:** The mind itself is dramatic
5. **Voice is strong:** Distinctive thinking voice creates character

Example of effective direct thought from *Atonement*:

"She knew at once what was happening. It was a form of defense. She was numbing herself with generalities, she was deepening the trance. She was becoming a spinster, and her narrowing options were like a lock of a door closing."

This is direct explanation of Briony's self-awareness - and it's powerful.

When Direct Explanation Fails

Direct thought fails when:

1. **It's redundant:** Stating what action already showed
2. **It's obvious:** Explaining feelings clear from context
3. **It lacks voice:** Generic thinking that could be anyone
4. **It replaces dramatization:** Telling us "she was angry" instead of showing anger's effects
5. **It's expositional:** Using thought to dump information

Example of weak direct thought:

John was very angry at Mary for lying to him. He felt betrayed and wondered if he could ever trust her again.

This is explaining rather than rendering thought. Better: "The lie sat between them like a wall" or render his angry thoughts in his voice.

The Actual Principle

The real craft principle isn't "never explain thoughts" - it's:

Choose the right narrative distance for your material. Sometimes direct access to consciousness serves best; sometimes oblique rendering through action serves best. Use the full range from transparent thought to pure external action, depending on what each moment requires.

The spectrum of consciousness rendering:

1. **Direct thought:** "She thought about leaving"
2. **Free indirect discourse:** "Maybe she should leave"
3. **Psycho-narration:** "She considered her options"
4. **Behavioral:** "She stood, gathered her coat"
5. **Pure external:** "She left"

All are legitimate choices for different effects.

Why This Corruption Matters

This rule damages fiction by:

1. **Eliminating interior complexity:** Can't show nuanced thinking
2. **Privileging action over thought:** Some stories are ABOUT consciousness
3. **Limiting narrative range:** Forces all fiction toward minimalism

4. **Misunderstanding fiction's advantage:** Fiction can show thought directly - film can't
5. **Creating false sophistication:** As if indirection is always superior

Most critically, it teaches writers that **thought itself is boring**, when actually consciousness is one of fiction's most powerful subjects. The modernist revolution was built on direct access to thought - Woolf, Joyce, Faulkner.

The actual challenge is rendering thought in ways that are vivid, voiced, and dramatically interesting - not eliminating thought altogether.