

Show Don't Tell

The Source

This one traces back to Anton Chekhov's 1886 letter to his brother Alexander: "Don't tell me the moon is shining; show me the glint of light on broken glass." Beautiful advice in context. Chekhov was telling his brother to create sensory experience rather than abstract reportage.

The principle got academic legitimacy through the "mimetic" versus "diegetic" distinction in narrative theory (going back to Plato, refined by Gérard Genette in the 1970s). The idea: fiction can show (mimic action in scene) or tell (narrate/summarize).

The advice was sound in its original context: create concrete sensory detail that allows readers to experience rather than just receive information. Chekhov wanted his brother to move from abstract statement ("the moon is shining") to specific, evocative image ("glint of light on broken glass").

The Morph

Somewhere in the MFA-industrial complex of the 1980s-90s, this nuanced distinction became a commandment. Writing workshops started treating ANY narratorial summary as sin. Students learned: scenes good, summary bad. Showing good, telling bad.

The corruption reached its peak when people started confusing summary with telling. Summary is a narrative mode (compressed time). Telling is abstraction instead of concrete detail. You can show in summary: "He'd spent three years perfecting his contemptuous sneer." That's summary (compressed time) but it shows (concrete detail of the sneer) rather than tells ("He was contemptuous").

The morphing followed predictable stages:

1. Chekhov's advice for creating sensory detail becomes "show don't tell"
2. "Show don't tell" becomes "never summarize"
3. "Never summarize" becomes "everything must be in scene"
4. Writers produce bloated manuscripts where breakfast takes five pages

The Reality

Every great novel uses extensive telling. Look at the opening of One Hundred Years of Solitude: "Many years later, as he faced the firing squad, Colonel Aureliano Buendía was to remember that distant afternoon when his father took him to discover ice." That's pure telling - and it's magnificent.

Or Tolkien's "There and Back Again" - pages of telling before we get to Bag End. The opening of One Hundred Years of Solitude is masterful telling. So is the genealogical overview that starts The Sound and the Fury.

Consider also:

- Jane Austen opens *Pride and Prejudice* with pure telling: "It is a truth universally acknowledged..."
- Ursula K. Le Guin in *The Left Hand of Darkness* moves fluidly between scene and summary
- Cormac McCarthy in *Blood Meridian* uses paragraphs of lyrical telling between scenes
- Virginia Woolf in *To the Lighthouse* summarizes years in brackets while showing moments in detail

What Works

Showing works when:

1. The moment is dramatically significant and deserves full reader immersion
2. Sensory detail creates mood, atmosphere, or emotional resonance
3. Character revelation happens through action and dialogue rather than explanation
4. The concrete details carry symbolic or thematic weight
5. You want the reader to experience the event in real-time

Telling works when:

1. You need to compress time efficiently ("The war lasted three years")

2. Background information would be awkward to dramatize
3. The narrator's voice itself is part of the pleasure (Austen, Márquez)
4. You're establishing scope or providing context
5. The information matters but the moment doesn't warrant scene treatment

What Fails

Showing fails when:

1. Trivial moments get full scene treatment, bloating the narrative
2. Every meal, journey, or mundane action is shown in detail
3. The writer avoids summary out of rule-fear, creating pacing problems
4. Scenes become exhaustingly literal - every gesture, every movement

Telling fails when:

1. Dramatic moments are summarized that deserve scene treatment
2. Abstract statement replaces concrete detail: "He was sad" instead of "Tears tracked down his cheeks"
3. The narrator explains what the scene should dramatize

4. Character emotions are stated rather than shown through action/dialogue/thought

The Actual Principle

Create concrete sensory experience when it serves the story. Use scene for dramatic moments that deserve immersion. Use summary for context, transitions, and information that doesn't warrant full scene treatment. Understand that "showing" and "telling" exist on a spectrum, not as binary choices.

Or more simply: Match the narrative mode to the dramatic importance of the moment.

Why This Corruption Matters

This particular corruption is devastating because:

1. It creates bloated manuscripts where writers are afraid to summarize anything
2. It robs writers of one of fiction's most powerful tools - the ability to compress and expand time deliberately
3. It privileges scenic writing over other equally valid narrative modes
4. It makes writers afraid of their own narrative voice - the "telling" voice becomes suspect
5. It produces exhaustingly literal prose where everything must be dramatized

Most insidiously, it teaches writers that narrative summary is inferior, when actually some of the most beautiful and efficient writing in fiction is accomplished through masterful telling. The opening of *The Go-Between*: "The past is a foreign country: they do things differently there." Pure telling. Perfect.