

The Writing Center @ KUMC

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Show, Don't Tell

Professional writers, writing instructors, and instructors from other disciplines often offer the advice to “show, don't tell” as a way to improve writing. But why is this such a common recommendation? What exactly does this mean, and why should a writer show instead of tell? Fundamentally, to tell is to summarize and state, whereas **to show is to use actions, dialogue, statistics, facts, and anecdotes to support statements**. By showing, writers can more effectively communicate their ideas in a clear, convincing way.

When most people think of “show, don't tell,” they view it as something fiction and creative non-fiction writers follow when setting a scene or presenting a personal narrative. Because showing illustrates, fiction writers use sensory details and actions to draw readers into the narrative, immersing them in the story. However, this concept of **illustrating is also effective when writing a personal statement or cover letter**. Doctors applying for medical residency and fellowships must include a personal statement, and graduate school applicants are often required to, as well. Using the “show, don't tell” technique can enable writers to create a stronger impression on their readers. This can be done by citing an example that illustrates you have a certain quality, rather than merely stating (telling) that you have the quality. Personal stories can be used to illustrate attributes, skills, and goals that you want to highlight.

Showing can also be used effectively in research papers. When writing scientific papers, for instance, it is not enough to state that something is effective or ineffective. Statements must be supported by evidence, such as facts, statistics, or examples. In academic papers, these ways of showing are used to build on and strengthen the main points. Say you're writing a research paper about a medical condition. Using a case study can be included to illustrate the effects on an individual's life.

Remember, though, that showing is essential in effective writing, but telling has its uses as well. While showing is recommended for significant scenes and details, telling has an important place in narrative and academic writing because it is concise. Telling enables writers to move quickly between ideas, acting much like an outline to guide the reader from one point to the next. Telling between significant portions of showing helps transition the reader and gives a stronger sense of what the writer wants to emphasize, and what the reader can just accept as simple information. Telling only becomes an issue when the writer overuses this technique. Showing is used to provide details that help build on the primary points, but if a writer only shows throughout, the reader is likely to feel overwhelmed with details that may not seem significant. To avoid this, remember that when showing, choose the most effective details, those that convey your ideas most strongly and convincingly. “Show, don't tell” is not an absolute rule. **Primarily show, but connect the details by including some telling as well.**