

SHOWING VS. TELLING

TELLING is the use of broad generalizations. By contrast, **SHOWING** enlivens writing through the use of words, phrases, and sentences which create distinct and colorful scenes in the reader's mind.

In *A Writer Teaches Writing*, Donald Murray explains **showing** writing.

You may tell us "It was hot." Or you may show us by writing, "My shirt stuck to my back. Sweat ran into my glasses." In the first sentence, we had to take your word for the heat. In the other two sentences, we were there. We too have the same stickings and sweatings. Showing makes it possible for the reader to identify with the writer (p 288)

Students should learn how to identify telling sentences and how to change them to showing sentences.

INTRODUCTORY EXERCISES

Exercise 1: Labeling Telling and Showing Words

Directions:

☞ Provide a list which includes both telling and showing words

Examples:

good	cautious	rough
pretty	respectable	wonderful
boring	bumpy	upturned
ugly	great	awesome
awful	unlikable	bug-eyed
slow-moving	sweaty	horrible
curly	adorable	ragged
lovely	timid	purple
spotty	amazing	right
capable	looming	exciting
wild-eyed	obese	leathery
pug-nosed	mad	blue and white checked

- ☞ With the class, identify the telling words and then the showing words. Discuss the differences between the two groups of words, i.e., "Does the word create a picture in your mind?" "How does the showing word create a more specific picture?"

Examples:

Telling

good
awesome
boring
right

Showing

splotchy
blue and white checked
pug-nosed
bumpy

Exercise 2: Developing Showing Sentences

Directions:

- ☞ Write one telling sentence on the board from the list below.

The pizza was good.

It was hot.

My room was messy.

They were fighting on the playground.

My best friend is nice.

My brother/sister is a brat.

I like to have fun.

It was an awesome sandwich.

The weather was bad.

I was thirsty.

I was hungry.

It was a nice day.

- ☞ With the class, cluster words or phrases that will create a word picture for the reader by using strong verbs, dialogue, adjectives, and other specific details.

- ☒ Individually, ask students to rewrite the “telling” sentence from the board to a “showing” sentence using ideas from the cluster.
- ☒ Invite students to share their showing sentences. This sharing can be done orally, on the overhead, or on the board.
- ☒ Ask students to explain how their showing sentences are more specific than the telling sentences. Elicit from the students the idea that specific words and phrases create clear pictures in the reader’s mind.

Example:

Telling

I like to have fun.

Student samples:

Showing

I had to jump rope with Jenny and Melissa.

--Jenny R., 1st grade

My mom came in and said let's go get some pizza and we all got to go out.

--Shawn S., 2nd grade

Riding my skateboard up and down hills at Amusement World brings a smile to my lips.

--Joe C., 5th grade

I ran in from school, threw my backpack on the floor, grabbed my helmet, dashed outside on my A.T.V., and met John on the dirt road at the end of our lot.

--Danny P., 6th grade

Exercise 3: Developing a Showing Paragraph

Directions:

- 1 Write one telling sentence on the board from the list below

The pizza was good

It was hot

My room was messy

They were fighting on the playground

My best friend is nice

My brother/sister is a brat

I like to have fun

It was an awesome sandwich

The weather was bad

I was thirsty

I was hungry

It was a nice day

- 2 With the class, cluster words or phrases that will create a word picture for the reader by using strong verbs, dialogue, adjectives, and other specific details
- 3 Ask each student to write a "showing" paragraph using words and phrases from the class cluster, and ask the question, "Does this paragraph create a specific picture in your mind?"
- 4 Invite students to share their showing paragraphs. This sharing can be done orally, on the overhead, or on the board.
- 5 Have students explain how their showing paragraphs are more specific than the telling sentence. Elicit from the students the idea that specific words and phrases create clear pictures in the reader's mind.

Example 1

Telling

The pizza was good.

Student samples

Showing

The pizza was good. It had yummy cheese. It was delicious. I like
a lot of all that cheese. I can't wait. Oh, it tastes good. My pizza is
good because I like smiling.

--Petra Y., 1st grade

The pizza was good. It was spicy. My dad had two pieces of pizza.

--Kristina S., 1st grade

*The sloppy pizza dripped with cheese, and pepperoni fell off the side. The
scrumptious pizza crowded with green peppers and small bits kept falling off as
this delicious pizza went into my mouth. My mouth sizzled like I drank tobacco
sauce.*

--Heather G., 5th grade

Example 2

Telling

It was an awesome sandwich.

Student samples

Showing

It was cool. Tastes awesome! On the sandwich there is meat, ketchup,
and honey and peppers and lettuce and thousands of biscuits and
bread and the hollows of bread butter.

--Matthew S., 1st grade

*I saw the juicy tomatoes and smelled the mayonnaise when I
picked it up. I felt the rough seeds on the bun in my fingers. As I
took a bite I felt the dribble down my mouth.*

--Cory M., 2nd grade

I opened my mouth wide. The delicious, flaky crust of the deli bread crunched as I slowly but eagerly bit into it. The lettuce made a loud, crunching sound. The tomatoes slithered out away from the rest of the bread. The globs of mayonnaise tasted good on the thick slices of slimy, delicious turkey.

—Cynthia J., 5th grade

Example 3

Telling

It was a nice day, it was a terrible day

Student samples

Showing

I sat on the couch all afternoon watching Frank R. White's 100-LEAD PLOT EXPLAINS EVERY DETAIL.

—Sue M., 1st grade

Bzz! I tromped into the kitchen, stepping over trucks, shoes, and clean clothes, trying to get to the oven to turn the buzzer off and get my lemon cookies out of the oven. Mph! Mph! "What's that smell, Mom?"
"Well, if you ask me, I think your cookies are burnt!" she answered.
"Oh! No! After all my precious work, what am I going to do?"
"Well, first check if they are burnt."
"Orrk!" I opened the oven and saw that my cookies were totally demolished. They looked like coals set on a cookie sheet.
"Don't worry, honey, there might be other times."
"Rattle! Rattle! The silverware drawer rattled as I opened the drawer to get two hot pad holders and get the cookies out which smelled terrible. I reached in and came out with the burnt cookies in my hand.
Bang! I slammed down the cookie sheet on the cupboard.
Ouch! I had dropped the hot pad holder and my hand slipped on the hot pan.
"Man! I can't believe it. First I burn the cookies, then my hand," I mumbled.
Boyz! What a day!!!!

—Amy C., 5th grade

Example 4.

Telling

My room was a mess

Student samples

Showing

When my mom & brother was I never cleaned and there was my toys and things and things were all over the room and I had a messy bedroom.

--Jenny G., 1st grade

When my room was a mess there were clothes that my brother left on his bed and there were papers all around the room. Toys, crayons, robots, and my robot were taken apart and bargain hunter cards scattered everywhere. I didn't make up my bed. You think that was all? There was some food around the room.

--Bonaventure E., 3rd grade

One day when I came home from school, my mom said go to your room. But I said I never go in there. I could die. An avalanche of underwear could fall on me. But she said get in there. Sure enough, an avalanche of underwear fell on me. Boy, did it stink. When I got out of it I said to myself I'm going on a journey. I was going through a T-shirt tunnel when suddenly around the corner I saw a snake. Good, it was only a rubber one. When I got out of the T-shirt tunnel, I went into the sock domain. I walked around for a few minutes when I turned a corner. I saw a lion, when it was only a stuffed animal. When I got out I went into a small thing called a pants city. When I turned a corner and I saw an alligator, I busted through the robes and ran through the door. When I got out I told my mom I'm never going in there again. I was almost killed.

--Brian B., 4th grade

I walked into my room. My woolen scarf was stuck inside my lampshade. My lounge chair was bombarded by my dirty underwear and some shirts I was too lazy to pick up. I opened my closet and a huge box of marbles spilled onto my carpet. I was too lazy to pick them up so I sat on my unmade bed. I was supposed to change my sheets but was too lazy, and my sheets ended up wrinkled and wound into a ball in the corner of my bedroom. There were also my crayons which were crammed under my bed. There were books all over the floor and on shelves and drawers were stuffed with papers, pencils, books, notes. The phone rang and I ran to answer it which was in my room and had apple juice spilled on it. I answered it. It was my mom. She said "Jimmy did you clean your room like I told you?" Oh no! I had forgotten!

--Christina D., 5th grade