

SHOW AND TELL

Most writers have been told how important it is to *show* not *tell*. However it is often perfectly acceptable to *tell*, but it is important to remember that *telling* has its limitations.

Telling doesn't have to be bad writing, but it treats the reader as a **passive** consumer, informing them unequivocally what is going on. Showing lets the reader work out what is happening in the story for themselves. This makes the story into an **interactive** experience.

Showing requires a consistent point of view. In order to *show* what is happening in a story the reader has to be given a pair of eyes and ears, and a physical position in the story.

In writing there are different types of paragraphs – narrative and expository paragraphs are about telling, and descriptive and dialogue paragraphs are about showing.

Narrative paragraphs can introduce the reader to a new situation. Example: *In Newtown, the school holidays were a long empty space to be filled, and every day the children hung around in the street wondering what to do.* It's perfectly acceptable, indeed often necessary, to do a certain amount of telling in this way.

However, the purpose of *telling* the reader is to whet their interest – to take them by the elbow and point their attention in a certain direction. Once we've got their attention we need to let them come closer to the action, so they can see and hear what's going on for themselves. *That Thursday, Emma and Jacob were sitting cross-legged in the dust with their noses pressed to the dressmaker's window.* (A specific time and place has been given. And now let's listen as well.) *"My spider's winning," said Emma. "Her web is nearly done already."* At some point we might need an expository paragraph, to explain things. *Ever since the bomb went off the spiders had*

been getting larger and faster on their feet. An expository paragraph is like a narrative paragraph except it is not introducing the current story but giving a quick explanation of how we got here in the first place. In other words, back story.

A word about back story:

We often start a story near the interesting part of the action, so we might need a bit of back story to explain what happened before the story started. **NB** If your back story is VERY interesting, you might consider showing it, instead of just telling it. If it's boring, leave most of it out and deal with it in the minimum number of sentences possible, scattered through the text.

Because always remember, **your reader isn't interested in the boring stuff.**

Talking of boring stuff:

Transitions from one scene to another can be boring.

Maybe you've just shown in detail an intense exchange between husband and wife over breakfast. Then he goes to work – ok, we're following him, not her, we've established point of view. Do we want to show the whole journey? No, it's boring. It's predictable. What do we do? Either skip it, or ease the link with a small extra story that reveals character. As in:

Tom took great satisfaction in slamming the front door behind him so hard it nearly came off its hinges. Instantly, before even checking his pockets, he realised he'd left his phone inside the house. Too late, too humiliating, to ring the bell.

A train ride usually punctuated by frantic calls passed in what felt to him like unnatural communion with his own thoughts. His secretary greeted him with fury: "Where were you? I couldn't get hold of you!"

So you've got over the transition fairly smoothly, a one-sentence train ride buried in the centre of a little story with a beginning, a middle and an end.

NB New writers are often tempted to use **internal dialogue** to deal with transitions: *Tom thought about how irritating it was having to travel to work on a crowded train every morning.* It's for reasons like this that the dialogue tag "thought" is very much frowned on by most creative writing teachers, editors, critics etc (if you use it, always think whether it is strictly necessary and/or artistic).

Dialogue paragraphs – where we listen to characters talk – are a crucial way of inviting the reader into the action, in a way that allows the reader to experience the characters. It is important to remember that dialogue should be used as *showing* not *telling*. Never use dialogue to tell the reader what the characters already know.