What to do when your professor says...

“Show; Don’t Tell!” or How to Make Your Writing More Interesting

The Writing & Learning Studio Room 4301 Shoreline Community College rev: 10-13-16

***1. Avoid Abstractions***.

Abstractions are words that describe feelings or make judgments about a situation. They try to describe an experience in one single word and usually don’t do a very good job. For instance, if your sister asks you how you are doing, and you reply, “I’m doing great,” you have told your sister very little. *Great* is an abstract word that makes a judgment. On the other hand, you could say something like this: “I was working on my laptop at the University Village Starbucks when this oddly familiar-looking person walked up to me and asked me my name. It turns out she was one of my best friends in middle school! I haven’t seen her for 20 years!” Now your sister would know that you’re feeling great, as well as why, because you **showed** her instead of **told** her. You used real-life details and actions to **show** that you’re feeling great instead of just saying you are feeling great.

So, in your paper, **find and replace abstract words with physical details** that show the reader what the abstraction only tells us. More examples follow:

**Telling:** Roberto was angry at the waiter. (“Angry” is an abstraction. How do you know Roberto

was angry?)

**Showing:** Roberto pounded his fist on the table and yelled at the waiter to bring his check.

**Telling:** The last five minutes of the movie made me very sad. (“Sad” is an abstract word.)

**Showing:** The last five minutes of the movie made me feel like curling up into a ball and crying a thousand tears.

**Telling**: When Michael’s father died, Amy really helped him. (“Helped” is an abstraction. What

helpful things did Amy do?)

**Showing:** When Michael’s father died, Amy called his friends to let them know, helped with the funeral arrangements, and prepared hot food for the family gathering.

**2. Use all five senses in every descriptive essay (unless your teacher gives you other instructions).**

This helps your readers imagine the scene you’re creating. Find places in your essay where you can insert details showing how things taste, feel, sound, smell, and look. Here are some examples:

**Telling**: The unripe blueberries tasted sour.

**Showing taste**: The unripe blueberries made my eyes squint and my whole mouth pucker.

**Telling**: Jose’s face felt rough to the touch.

**Showing touch**: Jose’s face felt like course sandpaper.

**Telling**: The choir sounded beautiful.

**Showing sound**: The choir sang like angels praising the Lord.

**Telling**: Ruzana’s jacket smelled really bad.

**Showing smell:** A skunk must have died in Ruzana’s jacket.

**Telling**: Mrs. Brown was in a hurry.

**Showing sight**: Mrs. Brown ran out of the store without even waiting for her change.

**3. Make your details specific.**

This will help readers picture in their minds exactly what the scene looks like and be more interested in the story you’re telling. **Find places where you can add adjectives, adverbs, and additional descriptive phrases** to provide more interesting details. See the following examples:

**Vague**: I had fun driving my grandfather’s car.

**Better:** I wrapped my fingers around the polished wood steering wheel of my grandfather’s 1982 Buick and pressed the gas pedal to the floor.

**Vague**: The school lunch was gross.

**Better:** Monday’s school lunch consisted of boiled brussel sprouts that looked like old tennis balls and smelled like my brother’s shoes.

**Vague:** Natalya had to move into a tiny apartment.

**Better:** Natalya had to move into an apartment so small that it could only hold her twin bed, one chair, and a 24” square table.

**4. Make scenes, not summaries**.

This helps the reader picture your writing as if it were a movie or a television show. They will “see” and “hear” and “smell” what’s happening in their imagination. Find places where you summarize and turn them into scenes. Here are some examples:

**Summary**: Every day of class was horrible. I hoped the teacher wouldn’t call on me because I never did my homework. The other kids made me feel stupid.

**Scene:** 40 more minutes before recess. From my desk in the back of the room, the clock’s second hand looked like it was moving backwards. I ducked behind the open book I clutched, hoping Mr. Wilson wouldn’t ask me any more questions about last night’s homework. Jesse and the other 4.0 students in the front row were just waiting for an excuse to laugh. Cautiously, I raised my eyes over the top of the book and was relieved—at least for a moment—to see Mr. Wilson’s shiny bald scalp instead of his eyes looking at me.

**Summary**: Last weekend we had a surprise birthday party for my mother. I decorated the living room with balloons, and all of our relatives came. My mother was really surprised!

**Scene:** It was 7:00 Saturday night. All my aunts, uncles, and cousins crouched in the dark behind the living room furniture, anticipating my mom’s arrival. Purple and orange balloons (mom’s favorite colors) floated in every corner of the room. “Shhh! She’s coming!” my Aunt Sophie whispered loudly. The front door knob turned, mom stepped into the house and flicked on the lights. “SURPRISE!!” everyone yelled. Mom dropped her bag of groceries and stared at the crowd with her mouth open.

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