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# Editing: Show, Don't Tell!

 0 Comments

You've created characters with depth, laid out a terrific plotline and written your first draft. Now what? It's time to edit.



Oh, I know. . .many novelists believe that editing is no fun. They think it slows down the process. Still, it's a critical part of the equation and meant to be enjoyed.

You'll find lots of lessons on this site about polishing and perfecting your novel. We will discuss passive versus active voice, self-editing and common fiction mistakes.

Editing can be fun, if you put your heart into it! (And your eraser!)



Ready to edit? Let's get going!

# SHOULD I TELL THE READER A STORY, OR SHOW HIM?

Imagine you had tickets to the theater to see what you thought was going to be a really great play. You could hardly wait to see the exquisite costumes, hear the actors' rich voices, gasp at the breathtaking backdrop, and so forth.

*"Seeing" the play with your own eyes is the equivalent of "showing" in fiction. That's what you want to do. You want to present life-like characters, great costumes, clear visuals, etc.*

Now, back to our theater analogy. Imagine you arrived at the theater, took your seat, waited in anticipation for the curtain to rise. Up it went, and there you sat, anticipating that first scene. . .only to watch a somewhat monotone narrator appear on the stage, along with a few stick characters off to the side.

"Hmm. I'll give this a chance," you might tell yourself. The narrator begins to speak. "Bob went to the store," he intones. "Bob wore blue slacks." You look around, noticing the look of shock of the faces in the audience. Before long, many patrons are dozing. And, as the narrator carries on and on about the man Bob used to be before he became the man he is today, you find that your eyes have grown heavy, too.

## DOZING PATRONS

I think you get the point. People who've paid to see a play want to "see" a play. And the same is true with our readers. We don't just want to keep them awake. We want to make them *want* to turn the pages. This is done by "showing" the story, and not telling it.

# SHOW, DON'T TELL

It is the goal of every good writer to show the story, not to tell it. Any time you resort to "telling" the story, you've slipped. There are several indicators of telling (passive verbs like is/are/was/were and words like "had"). Showing the reader is the better choice.

## PASSIVE/TELLING WRITING

There's nothing worse than being in the middle of a great scene that comes to an abrupt halt so that the author can "tell" you something about the character. *"What I need you, the reader, to know is that Julie had a rough childhood. You're going to learn more about this later in the story, but I just wanted to spend a couple of paragraphs here, early in the story, to tell you about her earlier, off-stage predicament."*

What? I might need to know that Julie had a rough childhood, but don't stop the action to tell me. *Show* me!

## CLEAN UP THAT MESS!

Passive writing is called "sloppy/lazy" writing. Readers might not know the difference, but editors do. On the other hand, readers know when they like a book and when they don't, and passive stories are often unlikable stories.

It's better to learn to show vs. tell now, not just because you're going to present a manuscript that's well written, but because it's less work on the editing end. You won't have to do lengthy re-writes. Ineffective narrative stops the flow of the story. To make it more active, choose active verbs; write in a more tantalizing way. Show through dialogue and action. You don't have to *tell* that the character is five foot

three; you can show this through a line of dialogue of from another character. You don't have to say, "She had blue eyes." Maybe someone could compare her eyes to the color of the sky.

## **PICK UP THE PACE**

Let's go back to Julie—the one with the troubled childhood. Imagine you're writing her story, and you suddenly stop the action to elaborate about the color of her hair or the blouse she's wearing. Sure, it's okay to mention those things, but be careful with your descriptives. Don't go on and on. If you do, the reader will soon be yawning. Active writing never causes the reader to have to say, "Wait! What happened to the story? What's with all of this description?"

## **INFORMATION DUMPING**

I address the issue of Information Dumping more thoroughly in another lesson, but I want to touch on it here. Loading up a paragraph with descriptive narrative is what I like to call "information dumping." Writers are particularly heavy-handed when it comes to settings. They want to wax poetic about the color of the flowers, their scent and their texture. They want to resort to purple prose, going on and on and on about the snow-capped mountains, the ripples in the water, the contrast of the white clouds against the blue sky. Exquisite narrative can be great, but use it sparingly. Break up your descriptions with dialogue. Keep a healthy balance between the two.

## **ACTIVE WRITING (C'MON! SHOW ME!)**

To keep your story more active, jump in with a good, strong "active" hook. Create characters that readers can relate to. Avoid lengthy paragraphs filled with descriptives. Every single paragraph needs to be active. This means you have to choose active verbs, not passive ones. To keep writing more active, you need to

incorporate as much tension as possible on each page, internal or external. Get rid of backstory or show it in small snippets. The goal is to keep the reader hooked from pg. 1 to pg. 331. In order to do that, you must "show" the action in its fullest.

*Still having trouble figuring out how to do that? I'm going to leave you with several examples.*

## **HERE ARE SOME EXAMPLES OF ACTIVE VS. PASSIVE WRITING:**

The following authors submitted these examples from their own work. None of this material is mine, but all of it is used with permission. Notice how they introduce the line of text in passive voice first and then correct it.

### **From Betsy Ann St. Amant, author of *Midnight Angel***

**Passive:** "She felt scared."

**Active:** "Greer shook her head, hands clutching the blanket so hard her fingertips grew numb. The nightmare wouldn't let go. She shivered, fighting the images trying to pull her back into the abyss."

### **From author Zoe M. McCarthy**

**Passive:** It seemed everything was going wrong that day. Maybe she was being hard on herself, but she felt many of the disasters were caused by her lousy attitude.

**Active:** How many disasters could fill one day? Short on culprits, she executed a reality check. No doubt about it. Her lousy attitude had launched many of the debacles.

## From Stephanie Grace Whitson, author of *When Shadows Fall*

**Passive:** None of them was dressed in anything approaching Liberty Belle's imagined finery.

**Active:** Not one wore anything like Liberty Belle's imagined finery.

## From author Cynthia Ruchti

**Passive:** The waves were hitting the shore.

**Active:** Watery fingers slid forward on the sand and tickled the sunlovers' feet.

Each of the examples shared by these authors has one thing in common: Switching them to active voice—killing off passive verbs—made them spring to life. The same is true with your writing. When you show instead of telling, you're giving the reader the strongest, most "active" story imaginable.

*Go forth and write. . .in active voice!*



**By JThompson**  
**March 22, 2024**

**Fiction Lessons**

Edit

**← Common Fiction Mistakes**

## Stop, Drop and Roll: Adding the Crisis Scene →

### COMMENTS

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