Show Not Tell

Think for a moment about examples of writing that really "pulled you in"—the first paragraphs of a mystery novel, a very personal, intimate letter, an impassioned political essay. What was it about the writing that was so gripping? Regardless of the type of writing it was, chances are the reason you were so impressed was that the words caused pictures to form in your mind and feelings to rise in your gut.

Vivid descriptions are powerful tools for writers. When you learn to write descriptions, you'll be able to develop visual pictures in readers' minds. You'll transform dry statements of facts into fascinating illustrations. People will not only read and understand, they'll relate and react.

One of the best ways to learn to do this is called show not tell. Developed by Rebekah Caplan, this technique takes “telling sentences” and converts them into “showing paragraphs.”

Consider this sentence: “It was a pretty day.” There’s nothing wrong with this sentence. It’s grammatically correct. However, it lacks the specifics that make descriptions come alive. What exactly does pretty mean? Maybe the writer’s idea of pretty is quite different from yours. And what time of day are we talking about here? What day of the week? If it’s a Saturday, you might see the day differently than if it’s a Tuesday. In short, after you read this sentence a picture might form in your mind that’s not even close to what the writer intended. What’s more, “It was a pretty day” is vacuous and boring!

If this “telling sentence” were changed to a “showing paragraph,” it might read like this: “The moment she opened her window that bright Saturday morning, she felt the freshness crackling in the air. The leaves on every tree sparkled with reflected sunlight. The rainbow of flowers lining the front walk shouted ‘spring!’ And above it all, puffy white clouds scuttled across a brilliant blue sky.”

Now you know exactly what the writer means by a pretty day. You can see the scene in your mind as clearly as if you were watching it in a movie. When you use show not tell, paragraphs form naturally and vividly. They seem to take on a life of their own. The effect is fun and easy to achieve—just show the scene as if you were filming it.

The best thing about show not tell is that every writer will come up with his or her own unique description for any given “telling sentence.” It’s impossible to do it without letting your own personal style come through.

Now that you know how to turn boring old “telling sentences” into elaborate and colorful “showing paragraphs” give it a try! Write down a couple of phrases such as, “His desk was a mess” and “The meeting went well.” Turn these sentences into vibrant, enthralling paragraphs by showing your reader what you’re seeing in your mind. Once you realize how much more fun it is to show what you write, you’ll never go back to telling again.