

## SHOW, NOT TELL: *A more descriptive way to write*

### I. ACTION

This is a "telling" sentence: She was angry.

- Do you "see" anything when you read this sentence? NO!

This is a "showing" sentence: She kicked open the screen door, letting it slam against the porch wall as she dashed outside. Down the steps and into the yard she flew. Grabbing the first rock in her path, she hurled it back toward the house. It crashed through the living room with an explosion of shattered glass.

- Now you can see something! The word 'anger' is never used. But you knew the girl was angry because you were right there, "watching" it happen.

### II. Dialogue

This is a "telling" sentence: My dad and I argue a lot. He never listens to me.

- Do you hear anything? NO!

This is a "showing" passage:

"Dad, I can handle it," I said. "Ten hours a week at a job is just a couple of hours a day."

Dad put down his coffee cup and glared at me. "I said no job, Steve," he insisted. "You have your whole life to work, or bum around with a band, if that's what you want to waste your time doing. Right now, you study."

"I *do* study," I told him. "And I *will* study. I promise I won't let my grades slip. But the band is starting up now. I need that new snare drum now. I'm not even asking you to buy it for me. All I want is ---"

Dad's herculean hand, clenched in a fist, hit the solid tabletop with a bang. "No job!" he shouted. "And no band! School comes first and that's final!"

"Dad you're so unfair! You don't understand me!"

- Do you *hear* the anger and frustration?

### III. Sensory Images

This is a "telling" sentence: My room was a mess.

This is a "showing" passage: To enter the room, I was forced to squeeze in the small door opening, pushing aside heaps of dirty clothes obstructing the path of the door. Once inside, I had to concentrate fully on every step so that my shoes wouldn't become tangled in the laundry and cause me to fall. Steps later, after freeing my leg from a malicious pair of blue corduroy pants, I noticed that under the spot vacated by those pants was a matted piece of green shag carpet. So that's what the carpet looked like! As I waded through last semester's crumpled homework and a Shakespearean diorama of the Globe Theater I neglected to turn in, a Pink Floyd poster, only partially pinned to the wall, attacked me from above! I swung my body around to sidestep the falling obstruction and knocked my funny bone against a drawer jutting out from the half-empty clothes dresser. Howling in pain, I flung myself over the hills and valleys of half-eaten TV dinners, soda pop cans and remnants of last Halloween's candy hoard. I landed safely on my bed, long parted with its sheets, pushing aside the withered flowers from my birthday three weeks past and my tattered friend Pooh. I wondered if I wouldn't be safer in another room.

See if you can tell what object these "showing" sentences are describing.

1. Locked and lonely, it sits still, imprisoned by the sun, waiting to be set free and rip down the road with ease. \_\_\_\_\_
2. Dancing along the walls, they delicately introduce themselves to the music and tip toe among the other instruments. \_\_\_\_\_
3. Like the odor of a flattened skunk on a dark highway, it cruised from the dumping ground via brisk breeze. \_\_\_\_\_

Other "top ten" showing sentences:

- Tears in the upholstery made the car look like a victim of Jack the Ripper.
- A ricochets of screams reverberates throughout the gymnasium like a thunderous waterfall colliding furiously against sharp rocks.
- The room shouted with quietness.
- All surrounding cars bled into the background, like a sidewalk chalk drawing in the rain, their dull colors trampled by the vibrant yellow Mustang.

Now try to write one of your own! Try turning these telling sentences into showing sentences (or write your own telling sentence, turning it into a showing sentence).

- The afternoon was hot.
- He/She was so cute.
- It was hard for me to sleep.

**You can take any "telling" sentence, or even a word, and "show" it to your reader. The following models were written by students like yourselves using either a single word or simple telling sentence. Can you see what they are trying to show through their writing?**

**Poverty.**

The hard-packed dirt street is dotted with children dressed in tattered old clothing. They laugh and shout joyously, as they scurry in and out of tired buildings, but in the background a baby starts to cry. A door on a nearby shack opens with a creak. An old, withered man with a gray beard pokes his head out. The door slams and glass breaks. Black smoke billows out of a bent stovepipe and pollutes the air. A police car cruises down the dirt road, hitting the numerous potholes and ruts. Startled, the children run inside, but when the car turns the corner out of sight, they quickly reappear.

**Rain.**

The thick menacing clouds gathered at the horizon, darkening the sky in the West. Lightning flashed in the distant thunderheads, filling the atmosphere with tense static. A deathly silence fell. Every leaf and blade of grass stood silent and erect as though afraid the slightest whisper would bring the wrath of the storm upon them. No bird or insect dared to fly. Then, suddenly, the grass flattened, the trees bent double, the clouds advanced with a rush, darkening the land. Huge, cold drops poured down.

**The ocean was stormy.**

The gun-metal gray clouds blanketed the sky. Giant sixteen-foot waves crashed against the rocky shoreline. Wind-blown mist sprayed against the beach houses, with their windows all boarded up. The inky green-gray water violently swelled up and down, churning up white foam. Like lost souls, chilly arctic winds howled in and out of the many caves and alcoves in the cliffs. Lightning flashed off in the distance, echoed by the dull rumbling of thunder. Few seagulls braved the gale-force winds and chilling rain to hunt for food.

**The old man was ailing.**

The old man, lying in the hospital bed for three days, caused the room to smell musty. Prescription medicines were scattered around him along with cough suppressant bottles and other drugs. IV's pierced through the veins in his arms, and a hose connected his nose to a machine for respiratory problems. The man was asleep, but the features on his wrinkled face expressed pain and years of suffering. In the background, the constant monotonous beeps of the heart regulator suddenly ceased to a flat line. Emergency paramedics immediately performed electroshock, but it was useless. The room had become silent and solemn. You could almost see the old man's spirit ascend out of the room, still surrounded by a cloud of cigarette smoke; the smoke that had originally sent him ailing into his death bed.

Using one of the student models, imitate the writer's style, word choice, description, and sentence structure. Use the opposite of the model (i.e. poverty - wealth/oppulence, rain - sunshine, stormy ocean - calm ocean, ailing old man - healthy young gentleman). You might rewrite (or type) the model paragraph and write your imitation underneath each line (see the example below).

*Peaceful music - imitated - rock music*

The overture begins its sweet flowing music.  
*The guitars begin their screeching, hardcore riff.*

People's faces light up, as they set down their programs  
*Fans' heads bang, as they take off their shirts*

and focus on the lit-up stage.  
*and focus their bloodshot eyes on the lead singer.*

Satin toe shoes on point move across the stage in an  
*The metal chains on their pants jingle to the beat of the*

orderly fashion. Arms and legs gracefully float like  
*music. Arms and legs intensely flail, like*

swans in pristine water. Perfectly identical costumes and  
*the devil's tail in hell. Black leather outfits and*

the prima ballerina's tiara glitter in pink and gold.  
*the lead singer's tux and boxers reek of sweat and beer.*

People's faces begin to lose their smiles as the story  
*The fans start to lose consciousness as the green smoke*

continues. Mouths open to let out unstifled yawns.  
*thickens. Bodies sag to protest the concert's finale.*

Eyes slowly start to shut.  
*People suddenly begin to pass out.*

Too mellow for some.  
*Too heavy for most.*