

**DRAKE U**

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**Worksheet**

on

**Show Your Story, Don't Tell It!**

Don't tell me the moon is shining; show me the glint of light on broken glass.

- Anton Chekhov

### It's all about Immersion.

Creative writing should forge an emotional bond between the reader and what is being read. A great piece of fiction can operate at a high “intellectual” level, but without drawing the reader in with something that speaks to them on a “visceral” level, the reader will not be moved by the greater ideas behind the story.

### The definition of Tell

*-verb*

**to give an account or narrative of; to narrate; to relate**

It's like watching a movie with a narrative voice-over.

Think of any nature show where you are watching an animal hunt and a voice off camera is telling you what the animal is doing and thinking. The voice is “telling” you what the animal is thinking and doing.

### The definition of Show

*-verb*

**to cause or allow to be seen**

This is like watching a movie or a play and letting the actors demonstrate their feelings and emotions. The characters in your story ARE YOUR ACTORS! Let them act. Let them show the reader what is happening. Do not be that narrative voice off camera that is telling the reader what is going on.

On screen, you watch as a man falls to his knees next to the body of his dead son who was just struck by a car. Tears roll down his face as he gently lifts the boy's lifeless form and cradles it to his chest. He screams, sobs wracking his frame as he wipes blood from the dead boy's tangled hair. Continuing to weep, he pulls his son's head into his chest, burying his face into the boy's neck.

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You, the viewer, are moved to tears as the actor acts out the pain he is feeling over the loss that he is experiencing. You don't need me to step out next to him and say, "This man feels pain over the loss of his son." You can see that for yourself.

### So, what's the difference between Showing and Telling?

The basic difference between telling and showing is that with telling the writer is merely cataloging actions, feelings, emotions, and events. Showing paints an image that allows the reader's imagination to create a scene, and places the reader in the middle of it.

It is the difference between the laundry list and the laundry.

#### Exercise One

Below are three examples. Circle the sentences that you believe are telling:

Drake felt the heat of the car door.

Diann slid her hand over the wood of the park bench then used the worn old fixture for support as she eased into her seat.

The ice cracked and groaned under Conroy's feet.

Don't worry, at the end of this work sheet we'll come back to this and see how you did.

Now, let's move into Drake's Eleven Thinking Points to a more Showy Writing Style and examine how to go from telling to showing in your prose.

### Thinking Point One - Use Stronger Verbs

While verbs are not the way to show your story, they are vitally important! With a stronger verb, your words carry more weight and reach the reader on a deeper level.

Drake hit the wall.

Hit is a weak verb. The English language is full of words that are stronger. Words that will invoke a deeper response from the reader.

Drake struck the wall.

Drake bashed the wall.

Drake beat the wall.

Drake walloped the wall.

Drake whacked the wall.

Drake smashed the wall.

Each of these is a stronger verb than hit, and each. Each conveys a slightly different image in the reader's mind as well. It is up to you, the writer, to pick the one that conveys your message in the manner you want.

You do, however, want to avoid being a thesaurus. Our job is to take the reader from their dreadful life and let them escape into another reality. If they are forced to use a dictionary every few sentences to understand what we are trying to say, it causes vexation. (That means annoying.)

The reader will put the book down, move to something else, and recommend to their friends to skip reading your book.

Make sure your strong verbs are relevant and fit with the story. No one wants to read a Thesaurus!

Drake percussed the wall.

While percussed is an actual word, and by definition technically fits this sentence, it is an odd word to use here, and it will pull the reader out of the story.

Let's look at another great example:

**Drake put his gun in his holster, turned and walked from the room.**

Can you see the cowboy? See him put up his gun? Walk from the room? Sure you can! But now, let's just change the verbs!

**Drake slammed his gun in his holster, turned and stormed from the room.**

See the difference?

### Exercise Two

Now you try, here are a couple sentences, see if you can make their verbs more compelling for a reader.

The Policeman brought Drake into Principle Smith's office. Drake sat in the chair and looked at the principle.

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Drake ran across the battlefield, he sent a grenade into an enemy foxhole and got down.

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## **Thinking Point Two – Let the reader feel it. Don't tell the reader what to feel.**

Emotions and events are the fertile ground in which to "sow the show." Unfortunately, it is easy to slip into telling. Emotions and events are the way to the reader's heart. If you can immerse the reader into the feelings and emotions of your characters and the events taking place around them, your job as an author is more than half-done.

### Emotions

We don't want to tell our readers what the characters in our story are feeling, we want to show it to them. Let them experience these emotions for themselves.

**(The monster jumped from the bushes and) Drake was scared.**

Now, scared is a weak verb. And, since we just discussed using stronger verbs, let's replace it with something better.

**(The monster jumped from the bushes and) Drake was terrified.**

To be fair, "was" is a weak helping verb. You should take any opportunity you get to replace the word "was" throughout your manuscript. Let's replace the "was" as well.

**(The monster jumped from the bushes and) Drake felt terrified.**

In the above example, we are telling the reader how John feels – scared/frightened/terrified. But it is unlikely that the reader feels any of the fear that John is feeling. We have not given the reader any reason to relate to John at all. Let's re-work this into a more showy sentence.

**(The monster jumped from the bushes.) Terror washed over Drake, draining the blood from his face.**

Now, instead of telling the reader what John is feeling, we are showing them the fear within John. Taking it a step further, let us "show" the first part of the sentence as well. Still, from where I am sitting, the above is a bit of an overwrite, with information that you really don't need. Let's write that a bit tighter, shall we?

**(The monster jumped from the bushes.) The blood drained from Drake's face.**

Both examples let the reader know that John is scared. But, unlike the first, the second creates a distinct picture in the reader's imagination. It also connects the reader to John, immersing them deeper into the story.

Another thing you may notice is that we added words, or "word count" as we call it in the "biz." Yes, showing will add word count. But you are looking for a bang for your narrative buck. I would rather write a 160,000 word immersive showy masterpiece and struggle with how to cut 30,000 words from it than to write a 130,000 telly piece of garbage that will never get published. How about you?

### Take away your shortcuts – bland linking verbs

Many new writers fall into the trap of writing with shortcuts. These are very prevalent when it comes to writing emotions. **Was, were, has, had, are is, feel** and **felt** are all words you should pay attention to if you want to avoid telling in your writing.

**The monster was coming toward me, and I felt terrified. I had but one chance, the cliff. Though, I knew I was not fast enough. There was simply too much ground between me and safety.**

**The monster stepped closer. My entire body shook, and I could not breathe. My mind raced as my eyes darted around. There! The cliff. A sliver of hope I could grasp. But could I outrun this nightmare?**

When you run across a bland linking verb, especially in emotions.

#### Exercise Three

Here is a small passage, see if you can alter the text to get rid of the bland linking verbs and show the feelings in the text rather than having them told.

John walked into the classroom. Drake felt giddy. He was enamoured in John's smile. But Drake knew he wasn't good enough for the captain of the football team. Drake was sad at never being able to win John's affections. All he could do was dream.

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### Thinking Point Three – Avoid Filtering!

Filtering is the worst thing you can do to your story, and it rots it silently from the inside. Most aspiring writers have never even heard this term, but it is the number one thing that kills most stories.

Filtering has to do with what you want the reader to Focus on. And that comes down to understanding why we construct our sentences the way we do.

**I could feel the demon's hot breath licking the back of my neck.**

**The demon's hot breath licked the back of my neck.**

#### Take away your shortcuts – Thinking Verbs (which are always Filtering Words)

Another shortcut trap new writers fall into is in using thinking verbs.

could / can, decided / decide, experienced / experience, felt / feel, heard / hear, looked / look, noticed / notice, noted / note, realized / realize, saw / see, seemed / seem, sounded like / sound like, thought / think, touched / touch, wondered / wonder, was able to / am able to, watched / watch, etc., etc., etc.

These are almost always a tell, and should be avoided.

**Drake wondered how it would feel to fall to his death.**

**Drake's imagination ran wild. The wind rushing past him, whipping his hair into a tangled frenzy. The sight of the ground racing up to meet him – its sole desire to crush every bone in his body. The terror and ecstasy of his last few breaths of life.**

#### Exercise Four

Expand on these filtering sentences:

John felt Drake's gaze on his back as he sat at his desk. He wondered when Drake would get the guts to ask him out.

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The cat realized it would not make the jump.

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The policeman decided to shoot the criminal.

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Drake's touched the old, rusted hot rod. He wondered what it would be like to drag race.

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## Thinking Point Four – Write in Active Voice, not Passive Voice.

This can be a tricky topic to master, but it is not tricky to understand.

In an Active Voice Sentence, the SUBJECT is doing the ACTION.

In a Passive Voice Sentence, the TARGET OF THE ACTION gets promoted to the SUBJECT POSITION.

**Don't you just love how easy English Grammar is to understand?**

Look, this is not that complicated. Just diagram your sentences.

**The dog bit the boy.**

What is the subject? Dog.

What is the action? Bit.

So, the subject is doing the action – it's Active Voice.

Flip it around.

**The boy was bitten by the dog.**

What is the subject? The boy.

What is the action? Was bitten.

What did the subject do? NOTHING! It's Passive Voice.

### Exercise Five

Lets flip around some passive voice.

Drake, the only freshman on the field, was mesmerized by the varsity team.

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Counter to popular belief, black bears were awarded the award of best bear by the bear rating committee.

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The country singer was blasted by Atomic Man, radiation filling every cell in her body.

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### Thinking Point Five – Don't tell the Reader how to React

An easy way to grasp if you are telling instead of showing is by looking at the words you are using. Do the words tell the reader how they should react to the event? If so, you are telling.

**Then, in a totally unexpected move, the monster jumped at Drake.**

With the phrase, "in a totally unexpected move," we are telling the reader that Drake is surprised by what the monster is doing. Let's look at this another way.

**Drake** took another step back, and again the monster did not move. Letting out a shuddered breath, he forced himself to calm down. I just need to keep moving away and I'll be fine, he thought. Shock stabbed into him as the creature lunged, claws bared.

In this example, the reader is shown that Drake is surprised. Again, it adds word count. But it is a much more immersive read.

Avoid words that tell the reader how to react.

Unexpectedly, Suddenly, Abruptly, Out of the Blue, Without Warning, Surprisingly, All at Once, Etc., Etc., Etc.

### Exercise Six

Like previous exercises, let's expand on the following couple of sentences.

Drake abruptly stumbled into the varsity locker room.

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Without Warning, the chancellor transformed into the dread demon Ablabosmom.

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All at once, the monkeys attacked the adventurers.

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## Thinking Point Six – Let the reader see it, don't make them guess.

Showing is about eliminating ambiguity and vagueness within your narrative. A writer needs to paint a picture. If you assume the reader knows what you mean, you make an "ass" out of "u" and "me" as the old saying goes.

**There was an old shack sitting in the backyard.**

Nothing wrong with this sentence for the most part. But, is your definition of an old shack the same as mine? I doubt it.

**An old shack slumped in the backyard like a broken weed, its pale white paint faded and flaking. The door hung limp on its hinges, swinging in the gentle breeze.**

Now, with the second example, both the reader and I are on the same page. We both have a much better understanding of what that old shack looks like.

### Exercise Seven

Expand on the following passages to eliminate ambiguity:

The ambassador's disemboweled corpse was lying on the green carpet.

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Five ghosts were hovering above my father's yacht.

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The crusader was at the top of the bluff, looking down at the results of the battle.

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### Thinking Point Seven – Make it Personal

One of the hardest concepts to grasp about being a Showy writer is that you must make everything in your narrative personal to the POV.

Remember, if you are writing in First Person POV, or Third Person Limited POV (the two most common types of Narrative for Speculative Fiction), then it is your CHARACTER who is telling this story, not YOU.

Exposition is what separates Prose from other mediums.

You need to make sure your readers are engaged in the story, and to do that, you make the POV engaged.

Here's an example from one of my First Person stories:

It was chilly, even though it was August, and the street was deserted, even though it was about three in the afternoon. Across the road from me sat Café Jax—an ancient rust-colored brick building with a stained red and white stripped awning and an eerie wooden statue sitting beside its front door. What the hell was that thing even supposed to be? An Indian? An old white man? A child molester? I really had no idea.

Still, the windows promised “Old Fashioned Shakes & Malts” as well as “Awesome Burgers & Fries”, and since I hadn't eaten a thing since early that morning, they had my full attention.

And here is something from one of my Third Person Limited stories:

*Have I sworn allegiance to the just, or simply to the victorious?*

This question clawed at Valimane Dray's mind as he passed his gaze over the imposing group assembled in a loose circle beneath the Temple of Wisdom. Ten in total, including himself and Tyelay.

*Can the ends justifying the means truly cleanse my soul of what I've done this day?*

He could not say. The bile resting in the back of his throat was less ambiguous. Soot and ash congealed in his sweat conspiring to irritate the skin beneath his armor, exasperating the dark cloud saturating his thoughts.

Those in attendance stood around a central Sending Stone, and spoke in hushed whispers.

Waiting.

*I hate waiting.*

### Thinking Point Eight – Let your dialogue “speak”

Dialogue in a novel is not simply your characters talking to each other. It is a way for the writer to **show** more of their story. It gives insight into your characters, especially secondary and tertiary ones.

If they are not a POV character, we are not in their heads. So, the only way for a reader to understand their character is through what they say.

Look for narrative that can possibly be turned into dialogue.

**Sally was a twenty-year company woman. Drake knew she was frustrated. But he also knew she wouldn't roll over on their boss just for being an idiot. She had a conscience.**

**“Once again I covered for our imbecile boss.” Sally sighed and plopped into her chair. “But I couldn't let the thing go forward his way, Drake. You know it would have cost the company millions! I just wish I could tell the board and not feel guilty about ruining his career.”**

In the above, we could simply tell the reader all about Sally. Or, we could show her inner working through her interaction within the story.

#### Exercise Eight

Try turning the following passage into dialogue:

Drake watched as Grapolezan wrestled with the choice before him. His race of Vordians were known throughout the universe as willing to fight to the last man. But Drake's heavy weapons platoon had them dead to rights. Grapolezan and his fifty blood warriors wouldn't make it a couple steps, let alone up the hill, to Drake's position.

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### Thinking Point Nine – Let the reader hear it. Don't tell the reader what they hear.

Speech tags can be useful tools for showing rather than telling your story. Unfortunately, most people use them as tells.

“Let's go,” **Drake** said anxiously.  
“Let's go,” **Drake** said, trying to glance in all directions at once.

The first line merely tells the reader that John is anxious. By replacing the adverb with an action, you show the reader that John is anxious.

“Be quiet!” **Drake** screamed loudly.  
“Be quiet!” **Drake** screamed.

One word of caution, however. In today's literary market, more and more agents and acquisition editors are frowning at speech tags that include anything that does not refer directly to speaking. As in, he said, they screamed, she thought. I have to say, I think the major concern here is with the added adverbs like in the above example. If you replace the adverb with a showy piece of description, I doubt you will be called on it, since the sentence is stronger.

#### Exercise Nine

You know what's coming. Let's turn these telly speech tags into showy ones!

“I can't feel my legs,” John said quietly.

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“That’s because... that’s because your back is bent at a ninety degree angle,” Drake murmured sadly.

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“But, we were supposed to dance together at the senior ball. I promised,” John moaned angrily, “How can I do that when I don’t have working legs?”

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### Thinking Point Ten – Kill the adverbs.

The above is an example of another common mistake: using adverbs. But, adverbs are not just found in speech tags. Oh, no my friends. All writers, “especially” new ones, tend to “radically” overuse adverbs. “Luckily”, most adverbs are “easily” trimmed from your “lovingly” constructed manuscript.

Many adverbs are “simply” redundant and not needed in the sentence. Let’s look at a few more examples of redundant adverbs.

Keeping low, **Drake** quickly raced to the other side of the room.

Again, there is no way to race other than quickly. Removing the “quickly” from the sentence does not change the sentence one bit.

Keeping low, **Drake** raced to the other side of the room.

When the plane tilted sideways, **Drake** was thrown completely out the open door.

Really? Is there a chance that some reader will read this sentence and wonder if John left a leg or an arm inside the plane when he was thrown out? I doubt it.

When the plane tilted sideways, **Drake** was thrown out the open door.

And adverbs are not the only culprit. Oh, no, my friends. Adjectives can be just as bad.

Not wanting to sound *totally* stupid, **Drake** *completely* changed what he was about to say.

Vs.

Not wanting to sound stupid, **Drake** changed what he was about to say.

Do you really need the “totally” or the “completely”? Do they add to the story? Strengthen the sentence? No. They just add words, and weak ones at that.

Knowing the boy was *exceptionally* smart, **Drake** expected no less from him.

Vs.

Knowing the boy was smart, **Drake** expected no less from him.

Again, the “exceptionally” is not needed. If you want to stress the brains of the boy, use a stronger verb! This will stress the intelligence of the boy, while not falling back on a weak writing style.

Knowing the boy was *brilliant*, **Drake** expected no less from him.

## Thinking Point Eleven - It is O.K. to tell... sometimes

Keep in mind, writing is a balancing act. A novel that is one big “show” might be the worst thing ever written. There are times when you may *need* to tell.

If one character is telling another something the reader has already read, you would not want to “show” the character telling the tale again. Using a sentence like: Then, **Drake** told his wife of the monster attack, will suffice and move the story forward.

If the reader needs to know something, but not the details, such as moving the characters from one place to another: “They then traveled to Chicago.” If nothing happens during the trip, don't waste a chapter *showing* me the characters getting on the train, traveling across country, and arriving in Chicago. Just get me there and continue with the story.

### Putting it all together

Not to be completely arrogant, but here is a paragraph of something that was sent to me for editing. I have changed the names too, but the writing is the same. I use this just as an example of what to look for in your own work.

### Example of what was written

At that exact moment another earthquake struck, this one even more powerful than the last. Drake was thrown onto his back and the ground seemed to tip. He was powerless to stop his descent towards the mouth of the cave. Rocks broke away from the ceiling and rained down upon him. Suddenly he was tossed completely out of the cave, but was luckily able to grab onto the ledge as the earthquake subsided.

### Drake' Rewrite

At the same moment, another quake shook the world. The cave pivoted. Drake's breath caught in his throat as the floor dropped away beneath him. He slammed onto the stone ground, the air rushing from his lungs. Terror ripped through him with the realization he was sliding toward the mouth of the cave. Rocks broke away from above, raining down upon him. One struck him hard between the eyes, blurring his vision.

Flinging out his arms in a blind panic, Drake sought for anything that would halt his decent into the vast openness awaiting him. Like a bullet, he shot from the mouth of the cave, tumbling into the open air beyond. Arms flailing, one hand struck an outcrop of rock. His fingers clamped onto the rough stone in a death grip, halting his decent. Breathing hard, he clung to the cliff wall with his eyes closed.

#### Exercise Ten

Using everything you've learned in this worksheet, try your hand at turning these telly passages into showy ones.

Drake walked slowly across the room.

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The little girl looked so sleepy, Drake felt sorry for her.

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From the way Drake behaved in the crowded restaurant, you could tell he was attracted to the cute waitress in the black skirt. He tried a few things to get her attention, and eventually he thought he succeeded.

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Before we end this today, go back and take a look at exercise one, how well do you think you did?

Thank you for your time and attention. I hope you found it informative. I have started a blog dedicated to the discussion of the craft of writing. If you have specific questions, please send them to me at [author@maxadrake.com](mailto:author@maxadrake.com) and I will include them on [blog.maxwellalexanderdrake.com](http://blog.maxwellalexanderdrake.com).

I am on Facebook and Twitter as well. Please look me up.

Make sure you check out [www.DrakeU.com](http://www.DrakeU.com) for all my class handouts, information on appearances, and live on-line classes.

Drake