Session Notes: Showing Not Telling

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**According to Editors: Most Common Reasons for Rejections**

* Telling not showing
* Lack of suspense
* Poor pacing
* No connection to main character
* Plot too complicated
* Lack of proofreading

**Plots move forward through a combination of:**

* Exposition
* Action
* Dialogue/Internal monologue

*If writing doesn’t move the plot forward directly (through action/conversation) or indirectly (by providing a sense of place, illuminating character, motivation etc.), then it needs to be cut.*

**Telling rather than showing is when you present a conclusion you have reached about a character or place without providing proof.**

**Example**: *Carolyn is tired.*

* What could you say to prove to the reader that she is tired?

Proving: *Carolyn peered through drooping eyelids and stifled a yawn.*

**Example**: *The little boy was hungry.*

What does a hungry little boy look like, sound like, and do?

Proving: *The little boy stared through the restaurant window, his stomach rumbling.*

**From literature:**

*Telling*: She was angry.

*Proving:* (From Raymond Chandler’s *The Big Sleep*)

She slammed her glass down so hard that it slopped over on an ivory cushion. She swung her legs to the floor and stood up with her eyes sparking fire and her nostrils wide. Her mouth was open and her bright teeth glared at me.

**Showing not Telling in Descriptions of Place**

* **Telling**: They had lunch in an old-fashioned diner.
* **Showing:** In Yours Truly, the local diner, they sat in a high-backed wooden booth and ate fries smothered in cheese and bacon and fed quarters into the jukebox to play “Great Balls of Fire” and “Hey Jude.”
* From *Little Fires Everywhere* by Celeste Ng

**Showing Not Telling Through Interaction**

**Telling**: When they moved me to the smart kids’ class, I became insufferably arrogant.

* **Showing**:
* It was too much success for a 12-year-old to handle. Soon after my elevation to the smart kids’ class, I remember my new seventh-grade teacher roughly pulling me aside on the playground.
* “Your head is so big,” she said tersely, “I wish I could just pop it with a pin!”
* This was a disturbing concept, and still occasionally visits my dreams: a towering, wrathful nun, pink face wrapped and pinched in starched white linen, wielding a huge pin pulled from some obscure corner of her habit. This was the closest any of the good sisters ever came to abusing me. Still, given my swaggering self-importance, she showed saintly restraint.
* From “Dumb Kids Class” by Mark Bowden

**Showing Exercise: Choose two and rewrite to prove, not tell.**

1. It was a hot day in the French Quarter.
2. The cat loved Mary above all others.
3. He was impossibly conceited about his looks.
4. Now that his wife’s labor had started, Arnie was terrified.
5. The house looked haunted.
6. The girl looked lost.

**Pace** is the speed at which the story moves forward. Pace is used to create and maintain suspense.

**Action**: Contains few distractions.

Focuses on what character does, not what character is thinking.

Uses vivid sensory language.

For increased pace, start a chapter in the middle of the action.

**Dialogue:** The best dialogue is pared down, an abbreviated copy of real-life conversation. (Authentic but not realistic)

Reactions, descriptions, and attributions are minimal. Avoid adverbs.

**Dialogue**

Short, rapid-fire dialogue can be used to speed up the plot.

* Cliff Hangers- When the outcome of a scene or chapter is left hanging, the pace increases because the reader will turn the page to find out what happens next.
* End every scene/chapter with a revelation, threat, sudden interruption, question, or new challenge.
* Short chapters emphasize the content and increase the pace for the reader.
* Scene cuts, also called jump cuts, move the story to a new location, often with different characters, without an explanation of the location change. (Note—the cut must make sense and be easy for the reader to follow.)

**Language choices** are the subtlest means of pacing.

For faster pace:

* Vary sentence lengths
* Use short paragraphs
* Write in active vs. passive voice
* Try sparing use of Internal thoughts, italicized without attribution
* Use potent verbs
* Be aware of sound devices (alliteration, assonance, consonance)