

What's the Best Way to Present My Information?

Show, Don't Tell

Two friends are discussing a race one of them ran:

JAMIE: The other runner was gaining on me. She was getting closer and closer. I was afraid she would win.

MARIA: How could you tell she was getting closer? What did you do?

JAMIE: As I rounded the last bend, the crunching of footsteps on the cinder track got louder and louder. Then I felt the brush of her sleeve against mine as she tried to pass me. I pumped my arms and pushed my legs harder, thinking, You've got to do it! You've got to win!

Jamie's first description *tells* what happened in a general way, providing no details. Her second description *shows* what actually happened while she was running. By sharing the thoughts and feelings she experienced during the race, Jamie makes it possible for Maria to experience what happened too.

In writing, as in conversation, the details are what people care about. Whether you're writing a letter or a report for school, you can develop and expand your ideas by including interesting, lively details that capture and hold your readers' attention.

How to Show Rather Than Tell

Showing an Experience When you write about a personal experience, show what happened by using specific sensory details to bring the people and places to life. Look at the passage from "Baseball in April" on the next page. Notice how Gary Soto uses vivid description to show what he remembers about a visit to Disneyland.

What does Disneyland look like? What's special about it? What fun things did you do?

Literary MODEL

How do you get him to sit the first time? What do you repeat?

Professional MODEL

Telling

Disneyland's a great place. Our trip there was fun.

Showing

Disneyland stood tall with castles and bright flags. The Matterhorn had wild dips and curves that took your breath away if you closed your eyes and screamed. The Pirates of the Caribbean didn't scare anyone but was fun anyway, and so were the teacups and It's a Small World. . . . Maria's younger sister, Irma, bought a Pinocchio coloring book and a candy bracelet. Her brothers, Rudy and John, spent their money on candy that made their teeth blue.

Gary Soto, "Baseball in April"

Showing a Process When you explain the steps in a process or give a set of directions, you need to be especially clear and complete. Notice how the telling sentence below leaves many questions unanswered. The showing paragraph includes all the important details.

Telling

To train your dog to sit, make him sit down, then repeat the command over and over.

Showing

Stand him on your left side, holding the leash fairly short, and command him to sit. As you give the verbal command, pull up slightly with the leash and push his hindquarters down. Do not let him lie down or stand up. Keep him in a sitting position for a moment, then release the pressure on the leash and praise him. Constantly repeat the command as you hold him in a sitting position, thus fitting the word to the action in his mind.

William D. Wescott, *How to Raise and Train a Keeshond*

W R I T E R T O W R I T E R

Let us understand your character by what happens to him. . . . Don't tell us that John Smith was angry. Show him kicking over a wastebasket.

Judson Phillips, writer

Showing an Opinion Your opinions and beliefs are based on your experiences and on what you have learned from others. To show rather than tell your opinions, support them with facts, examples, or reasons. This student writer revised her telling sentence. She showed why she believes that solar energy is part of a solution to the world's environmental problems.

Telling

We should rely more on solar energy because it's better for the environment.

Showing

To save the environment, we need to rely more on solar energy. Solar energy—energy from the sun—is a cleaner form of energy than the energy that comes from burning fossil fuels, such as coal and oil. That means there will be less pollution and the air will be cleaner. The rate of global warming will slow down, and less wildlife will be displaced or killed by people searching the wilderness for new oil supplies.

Showing Information Showing information in a report or essay means supporting each of your main points with plenty of facts, examples, and details.

Telling

Animals play when they're young. That's how they learn survival skills.

Why is solar energy better for the environment? Better than what? How does it compare with other forms of energy?

Student MODEL



A woman uses a solar box cooker to prepare food.

Which animals? What survival skills do they learn?

Showing

Do animals really “play”? The next time you’re at a zoo, watch how the lion cubs frolic. One will crouch low against the ground, stalk slowly toward its littermate, and then pounce on the surprised “victim.” Such roughhouse sessions occur frequently among most carnivores such as wolves, tigers, cheetahs, raccoons, and coyotes. As they play, these young develop the abilities they need to become efficient predators.

Eugene J. Walter, Jr., “Why Do They Do What They Do?”

Practice Your Skills

A. Rewrite the following telling sentences, turning them into showing paragraphs. Use the writing strategies suggested in parentheses.

1. The movie was disappointing. (Show your opinion by supporting it with reasons and other evidence.)
2. There’s a greeting card for every occasion. (Show why this is true by giving several examples.)
3. You need to know how to make a good first impression. (Show the steps in this process.)
4. The party was great. (Show the experience by using vivid sensory details to describe what happened.)
5. She stood out from the crowd. (Show this character by describing physical details and actions.)

B. Write a showing paragraph based on each of the following sentences.

1. It was a moment no one would forget.
2. I love making my favorite food. You can do it too.
3. Our lunch period should be fifteen minutes longer.
4. Junk food is being replaced by more healthful food choices for both snacks and meals.
5. I felt out of place.