

“Show me, don’t tell me!”

It’s what you’ve heard from Literary Agents, Editors, and English teachers all of your life, but you’re still not quite sure what that phrase really means. And yet, it may be one of the biggest things standing in your way of having your work accepted for publication.

The good news is that it’s a common mistake and fairly easy to correct—easy in the sense of not being an extraordinarily difficult concept, but not necessarily easy in terms of being quick and simple to actually do. It may require you to have to rewrite major portions of your story, and sometimes the whole thing.

The key to it all is truly understanding the fundamental concept of Point-Of-View (POV). Many amateur writers often make the mistake of writing almost exclusively in the POV of “storyteller” unwittingly adopting the perspective of “omniscient narrator” (ON-POV), that all-knowing, god-like voice that tells the story in terms of facts and dates and what happened and who was there and what came next and so forth. The problem with doing this is that it is incredibly *boring*! It can turn even the most clever of storylines into a dull, lifeless rambling.

The cure for this disease is to consciously make the effort to only use the ON-POV when there is no other way to convey the information necessary to move the story forward through one of the characters in the story. Ergo, make sure that as much of the story as possible is always seen and experienced by someone in it. That’s the simple part.

This doesn’t mean that each scene or passage must be told from a first-person POV (1P-POV), although 1P-POV does make it easy to think a story through from behind a particular character’s eyes. No, even third-person POV (3P-POV), which is most commonly used, needs to reveal the story through the experience of one or more of the characters in the story.

Example:

(ON-POV) It was cold outside. John was shivering.

(3P-POV) John wrapped his arms tightly around his body as he felt the wind bite through his thin jacket. He couldn’t stop his teeth from chattering and was afraid he might bite his tongue.

(1P-POV) I knew I shouldn’t have worn that old jacket in that late November wind. My teeth were chattering so hard I was afraid I might bite my tongue off.

See the difference? In the ON-POV example, the “narrator” *tells* us that it’s cold, and *tells* us how it affects John. In the other two examples we are *shown* that John is cold, by the writer

showing us how the character of John *feels* in the situation, and it therefore becomes clear to us that it's cold, although the word "cold" never appears in either of those passages.

I've actually read passages in submissions like this:

John really wanted to make love to Marsha. Marsha wanted him, too. He took her clothes off, slowly, then his own. Then they laid down on the bed and made furious love for hours. Exhausted and spent, they fell asleep in each others arms.

Didn't exactly get your heart racing, did it? What is missing from this ever so brief passage is quite obvious—everything! It's supposed to be a love scene. People are naked. They didn't even fade to black. The facts revealed *tell* us there were hours of hot sex. Yet in three lines they're asleep. Don't you just hate it when that happens?

Now read this passage¹:

...with an alluring smile, he stepped behind her and slid the blouse off of her shoulders and carefully laid it over the brass footboard of the bed. She could feel his breath on her shoulder and the back of her neck while his hands unbuttoned and unzipped her skirt. His haunting fragrance filled the air and she breathed it in deeply.

While Chopin's pianist ran his fingers lightly along the keyboard, a slight push of Brett's palms against Nicole's hips sent the conservative tweed skirt into a gray pool at her feet. He ran his hands back up her hips, over the lace edges of her French cut panties and black lace garter, along the gentle curve of her waist, teasingly slow across her breasts and around to her back. A wave of electricity tingled up her spine; but she held still, letting her head tilt back slightly, resting it against his cheek, knowing her patience would soon be richly rewarded.

She felt him unclasp her bra, his fingers carefully cupping the fine lace straps and moving them forward until the delicate garment fell to the floor on top of the tweed skirt. She kicked off her shoes when she felt his left forearm gather up her legs, and his right arm pull her shoulders to him, lifting her up off the soft, white carpet. She rocked her head back, her respiration rate climbing with the pace of her heart. He carried her over to the warm, leather covered table and gently sat her down facing him. With meticulous care he unclasped her garter and slipped her black stockings off each leg. She cherished the feel of his powerful fingers sliding along her legs. She caught his gaze looking up at her, smiling, as his hands pulled at the edge of her panties.

She playfully grabbed his wrists; her eyes flashed. "Do it with your teeth."

In this passage we see the love scene begin through Nicole's eyes and within her experience, starting with a reference to the music she hears playing in the background, what she sees, and most importantly—what she *feels*. Incidentally, this particular scene goes on for six full pages of most intimate details from Nicole's POV.

¹ From *Anticipation* by Robert E. Gelinias, ArcheBooks Publishing, 2005, used by permission.

Common Sense

The technique we're illustrating here is "Sensory Detail." That is, tell the story in terms of what your characters perceive with their five physical senses—what they see, hear, smell, taste, feel, and even a sixth sense of intuition, if you want.

Another Example:

(ON-POV) The detective walked into the room and from the stench hanging in the air realized there was a dead body somewhere inside.

(3P-POV) Detective Smith cringed when the nauseating stench hit him in the face the second he came through the door, a familiar odor he never got used to, not at the morgue, not on a crime scene. The sound of the hungry flies swarming just beyond the couch told him exactly what he was about to find.

The same information is conveyed in both passages. The detective came in the room, and it stunk in there due to a decomposing corpse. In the ON-POV example we just get the basic information. In the other example, we get a sense of walking into that room from the detective's perspective and how he feels about it.

If you're unfamiliar with this writing technique, you may need to consciously sit down and analyze a scene you've written and ask yourself questions like:

1. OK, first and foremost, through which character's POV am I going to craft this scene?
2. What does this character see?
3. What does it smell like in this scene?
4. What does the character hear? Are there background noises?
5. What are they thinking?
6. What are they feeling?
7. What are they experiencing?

You don't have to answer each and every one of these questions in every scene, but you need to work with at least one or more of them. Nevertheless, the first question is always the most important, because the answer to that question is going to, metaphorically speaking, determine where you "put the camera." Yes, this is where you get to play Director of the little movie in your imagination and decide how the set is to be blocked, where the characters go, how the scene unfolds, and how the reader is going to be exposed to it all and perceive what happens.

What you don't want to do is make the reader go sit out in the theater seats and just passively watch the action. That's essentially what your ON-POV does to them. No, you want them to be a vicarious participant in the scene via the senses, thoughts and actions of one of the players in it. So who you choose to be your "camera" is very important. Think it through carefully.

There's no better use of this technique than in suspense novels. It's called "Victim's Vantage." If a character is in danger, don't tell the reader that. Put them in that character's shoes and let them walk down the long dark hall, hearing the creak of the floorboards, worrying that a shadow might be something sinister, or deadly.

Read the following passage²:

As she ascended the wide oak grand staircase to the landing on the second floor, she heard another sound—a different sound, a creaking sound, like weight applied to the old polished oak hardwood floors in the spots where the joists below were uneven or had warped. It definitely wasn't a normal house settling noise. She stopped and looked around in the darkness below her, her eyes slowly adjusting to the hazy dimness. The dark shapes stood their ground.

Nothing.

No movement.

Not a sound.

She shrugged with her bottom lip held tightly between her teeth and quietly plodded toward her room. Another wooden creak abruptly halted her progress. Only this time the sound was closer, louder, more distinct. It was a nearby sound.

"Skitch?" her voice was timid, whispered back over her shoulder.

Dark silence.

She took another step. It was echoed by another shadowing creak. It was unmistakable. The dark, cool air plainly announced she wasn't alone, but the harsh, shrill silence disputed the point.

"Who's there?" she could barely get the words out.

Agonizing silence; but now the dark sense of an unwelcome presence was even stronger—waiting in the shadows, watching.

Jennifer could feel her heart pounding in her temples as much as against her breast bone. Her mouth went dry in the rushing pace of her shallow breaths. The darkness of her own hall was suddenly menacing and malevolent, just as it had been when she was six years old and knew for certain that hideous monsters existed, lurking in the darkness, waiting to rip young girls to pieces with long sharp talons. Instinctively she knew she had to get to the light, away from the presence of this threatening blackness. Everyone knows Monsters can't tolerate the light. Trembling, she stepped through the doorway of her bedroom and reached for the light switch.

Her hand never made it.

Jennifer Marley felt something strong and sharp hit her in the throat, pulling her backward, yanking her from her feet. She couldn't breathe. She felt the violent vertigo of falling backwards, and the painful, abrasive sensation of hitting the floor and being dragged backward down the hallway. Her face felt like it was going to explode, eyes bulging, skin burning. Her diaphragm went into excruciating deprived spasms beneath her burning lungs. Her legs kicked furiously against the polished oak of the floor, slapping and thrashing. Her fingers clawed at her throat in panic, breaking off one of her finely painted nails. When she felt something

² Excerpt of *Dead of Night*, by Robert E. Gelinus, Pinnacle Suspense, 1993. Used by permission.

warm and wet up around her collarbone, her body went numb, paralyzed with fear. She lost control of her bladder. Everything within her tried to scream, wanted to cry out for Skitch to help her, to save her—but nothing escaped.

A clamorous ringing filled her ears as bright stars and phantom lights exploded before her eyes; and before the suffocating darkness prevailed, she lost all sensation in her feet and hands; till at last, the dancing sparks and random lights faded away, allowing the sharp, bitter cold to seep in: an unearthly cold, a devouring cold which eats human flesh, a black cold, beyond the shivers of a cutting winter wind or the sting of ice—a quiet cold, that beckons sleep.

Eternal sleep.

That passage is especially chilling because the POV of the entire scene is from the perspective of the girl getting killed, right up to the point of her death. Notice the references to the sounds she hears, what effect her fear has on her breathing, her heart rate, her thoughts and memories, and ultimately her terror and physical reactions when the actual attack ensues.

Now, one note of caution, just like in the movies, you don't want a "shaky camera." What I mean by that is once you make your decision which POV you are going to use in a scene, don't change it unless you absolutely have to. You can change to a different POV from scene to scene, but changing POV within a scene can get very confusing to a reader and ruin a great scene. If you must do it, say, because the person you were using just got killed, then use a device like a section break or some convention that makes it crystal clear who you are handing the camera to and taking it from there to the conclusion of that scene.

You may have noticed that in all of our examples, the "showing" version of a passage is longer, sometime *a lot* longer, than the "telling" version. That's true, just like the Cliff Notes of a book are never as long as the book itself. That should tell you something. Indeed, much of your rewrite of your story may be a process of taking the "glorified synopsis" you thought was great prose, and actually turning it into great prose by actually writing the story itself, scene by scene, character by character, putting your reader into those characters' shoes and allowing them to stimulate their own imaginations and emotions through what actually happens, not what some narrator reports happens. Got it?

Simple Conventions

To improve your writing from Telling to Showing is really an exercise in replacing as much omniscient narrative as possible with action and dialogue perceived through a particular character's POV in each scene.

For background information and back-story details, try to introduce that data in conversations between characters, recollections, or through discovery of records in some form or another that depicts the facts you want to get across—i.e. some *active* element within the story as opposed to the passive litany of narrated facts. Indeed, there will be occasions when this is impossible, like when the information isn't something that one of the characters in the story could know at that time in the story, but the reader needs to know to make sense of what's going on.

For settings and descriptions of locales, try to relate those details through the observations of the characters as well, perhaps recalling what they like about a particular place; or, for example, how they felt when they came over the hill and saw it. You'd be surprised by how much "setting" description you *don't* need. Sometimes a simple reference to an urban or rural setting is sufficient for a reader to get the gist of where a scene is taking place without having to describe how tall all the buildings are, what color the leaves are on the trees, how the weather is doing, etc.

The same "less is fine" idea holds true with clothing and costuming. Your novel need not be a fashion catalogue. Unless a character's manner of dress is important to a scene, don't waste a lot of time on it.

Example:

(ON-POV): When Cody got the call from the coroner informing him that the test results were in, he quickly got dressed, eager to find out what they said. He put on his blue sweatshirt, acid washed jeans with no belt, and Sperry topsiders, not even bothering to put on a clean pair of socks. Grabbing his car keys off the kitchen table, he ran out the door.

(3P-POV): "Yeah?" Cody pulled the phone to his ear and tried to read the clock on his night stand. The blurry red digital numbers told him it was 2:16 AM. He coughed once and cleared his throat, trying to scrape away the taste of cheap whiskey and cigar smoke off his tongue with his front teeth.

"Cody, the DNA test results from the Harkin murder case are in," Dr. Freeman from the coroner's office explained, his excitement evident from the nervous urgency in his voice. "And you're going to want to see this. But you're not going to believe it when you do."

"Thanks, Doc. I'll be there in ten." Cody slammed down the phone, his heart pounding. *If there was no match he would have said so. So who was it? Victoria?* He threw on a sweatshirt and grabbed his car keys as he ran out the door.

Do we really even care what Cody is wearing to go see a coroner in the middle of the night? No. Don't we give him the benefit of the doubt he's wearing pants and shoes without having to be told that? Do we care where he keeps his keys? No. It's all incidental and irrelevant to the excitement of some potential break in the case and the urgency to find out some new secret.

In a nutshell, if you're tired of being told, "Show me, don't tell me," you're going to have to kill the narrator.