

SHOWING VS. TELLING STRATEGIES

DEFINING THE TERMS

Telling = A general fact, which often isn't particularly engaging, memorable, or convincing on its own.

Showing = Specific details that distinguish, making the description more specific, unique, and convincing.

IDEAS TO POINT OUT

- “Showing” is a way to develop an idea. Descriptions will usually be focused on a main point—the thesis, dominate impression, key idea, etc.
 - For example, in the sample below, Jan Gray expands on her initial statement about the “grotesque” qualities of her father.
- “Showing” often uses sensory details—details that will be understandable to many readers: colors, weights, sizes, smells, sounds, etc.
- A few well-chosen details can go a long way (descriptions don't have to be long and drawn out): below, the “potato chip crumbs” in Ignatius's mustache say a great deal about his overall laziness and lack of ambition.
- “Telling” is not necessarily bad. Barack Obama, for instance, “tells” when he mentions below that “The apartment was small.” He makes a point quickly, since he seems interested in showing more about the overall neighborhood than just his apartment.
 - *Naming* is a common and useful form of “telling”: below, John Kennedy Toole names the department store where Ignatius J. Reilly stands; and Obama names the particular streets that help to define his neighborhood.
- Different disciplines will show in different ways:
 - *scientists* might show with measurements: the 24.3 pound tomato, rather than the “really big tomato.”
 - *creative writers* might use figurative language, appealing to the senses: “the tree hung its limbs and looked like an exhausted fighter,” rather than “the tree looked terrible.”
 - *economists* might use a graph to show the decline in a stock's value, rather than just saying, “the stock stinks.”

ILLUSTRATE “SHOWING” WITH EXAMPLES

With a vivid piece of writing, like these below, ask students to identify the attention-grabbing details that show, rather than just tell. Ask them *what* point the details are developing and *why* the details work or don't work. (Professional documents from other disciplines could be used, too: a lab report, stock prospectus, etc.)

I.

A green hunting cap squeezed the top of the fleshy balloon of a head. The green earflaps, full of large ears and uncut hair and the fine bristles that grew in the ears themselves, stuck out on either side like turn signals indicating two directions at once. Full, pursed lips protruded beneath the bushy black moustache and, at their corners, sank into little folds filled with disapproval and potato chip crumbs. In the shadow under the green visor of the cap Ignatius J. Reilly's supercilious blue and yellow eyes looked down upon the other people waiting under the clock at

the D. H. Holmes department store, studying the crowd of people for signs of bad taste in dress. Several of the outfits, Ignatius noticed, were new enough and expensive enough to be properly considered offenses against taste and decency. Possession of anything new or expensive only reflected a person's lack of theology and geometry; it could even cast doubts upon one's soul. Ignatius himself was dressed comfortably and sensibly. The hunting cap prevented head colds. The voluminous tweed trousers were durable and permitted unusually free locomotion. Their pleats and nooks contained pockets of warm, stale air that soothed Ignatius. The plaid flannel shirt made a jacket unnecessary while the muffler guarded exposed Reilly skin between earflap and collar. The outfit was acceptable by any theological and geometrical standards, however abstruse, and suggested a rich inner life.

Shifting from one hip to the other in his lumbering, elephantine fashion, Ignatius sent waves of flesh rippling beneath the tweed and flannel, waves that broke upon buttons and seams. Thus rearranged, he contemplated the long while that he had been waiting for his mother. . . . Looking up, he saw the sun beginning to descend over the Mississippi at the foot of Canal Street. The Holmes clock said almost five. Already he was polishing a few carefully worded accusations designed to reduce his mother to repentance or, at least, confusion. He often had to keep her in her place.¹

II.

A few months after my twenty-first birthday, a stranger called to give me the news. I was living in New York at the time, on Ninety-fourth between Second and First, part of that unnamed, shifting border between East Harlem and the rest of Manhattan. It was an uninviting block, treeless and barren, lined with soot-colored walk-ups that cast heavy shadows for most of the day. The apartment was small, with slanting floors and irregular heat and a buzzer downstairs that didn't work, so that visitors had to call ahead from a pay phone at the corner gas station, where a black Doberman the size of a wolf paced through the night in vigilant patrol, its jaws clamped around an empty beer bottle.²

III.

My father's hands are grotesque. He suffers from psoriasis, a chronic skin disease that covers his massive, thick hands with scaly, reddish patches that periodically flake off, sending tiny pieces of dead skin sailing to the ground. In addition, his fingers are permanently stained a dull yellow from years of chain smoking. The thought of those swollen, discolored, scaly hands touching me, whether it be out of love or anger, sends chills up my spine.³

¹ from John Kennedy Toole, *A Confederacy of Dunces* (New York: Grove Press, 1980), 13-14.

² from Barack Obama, *Dreams from My Father* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 1995; 2004), 3.

³ from Jan Gray, "Dreams of My Father" [student sample], In *The St. Martin's Guide to Writing* (New York: Bedford, 2004), 101-02.

LET STUDENTS PRACTICE SHOWING

Describing An Object

- Have students choose an object that they can see (the room, for instance).
- Ask them to brainstorm specific details about the object.
- Ask the students to look at the object in a new way (looking upwards at the ceiling of the room, for instance)—what else do they see?
- Ask students to choose a “dominate impression” for the room. Which details would they select in order to build that impression?
- After the students understand the general principle of “showing,” ask them to describe a smaller object, using the same process.
- * You can also ask students to describe a concept that they know well: How would you describe an offensive play in a football game? A moment of crisis while babysitting? etc.

Apple Exercise (similar to “Describing An Object,” but a bit more involved):

- Ask students to bring an apple to class.
- Ask them individually to write down 5 defining traits of their apple.
- Have students place their apples on a table; as a volunteer reads one student’s description, see if the students can find the apple being described.
- You might then discuss the effectiveness of the students’ descriptions: Which descriptions were effective? Why? What alternative descriptions might be used to distinguish each apple?