



# Words Th

**S**how—don't tell. It's advice that writers always get. What does it mean?

It means that your job as a writer isn't just to tell a story, but to create vivid images in your reader's mind. Your purpose is not just to sketch out a plot line, but to build a world with words.



How can it be done? Part of the answer lies in the use of words that create images—words that make readers *see*.

### Words That Work Harder

Consider these sentences:

The car *went* down the street.

The car *raced* down the street.

*Raced* provides the reader with a stronger

mental image than *went* ever could. *Swerved*, *careened*, *lurched*, or *sped*, among others, also would work harder than *went*. Descriptive verbs are crucial to creating images. After you write down any verb, think: Is this the one that presents the action most vividly?

Consider nouns, too:

The *car* raced down the street.

The *limousine* raced down the street.

No car is just a car; each is a particular type or model. If you give readers that extra information, they can see the scene better.

Descriptive adjectives and adverbs also help create images:

The limousine *raced* down the street.

The *elegant, white stretch*-limousine *raced erratically* down the *rain-spattered* street.

Carefully chosen modifiers can create powerful images. Ask yourself: What about the car do I really want to stress? What words can I find to make it happen?

### The Power of Details

Part of what gives words visual punch is focus. The more specific a word is, the more power it has to create strong images.

This is true not just in individual sentences, but in whole paragraphs and stories. Let's say you're writing a story about two teens visiting the local mall. Here's one version:

Adam and Jay walked through the mall. They browsed in a store with a lot of high-tech things. Then, they tried out exercise equipment at a fitness store. Next, they played with a puppy at the pet store. Finally, they tried on athletic jackets.

That might be what they did—but what did it look like? Where are the pictures? They're in the specifics that this version left out. Here's another:

## Image Buildi

- Usually, sentences that create mental images appeal to the senses: sight, touch, hearing, taste, smell. These are the ways that readers experience life, after all; they're also ways for them to experience your writing.
- *Onomatopoeitic* words—words that sound

# FWJ

# What Show

## Creating Images with Language

One blustery March Saturday, Jay and Adam biked to South River Mall. They walked through the crowded main corridor, jostled by herds of other teens. Their sneakers squeaked on the marble floors and echoed off the high walls. Their voices blended into the constant low murmur of the mall, broken now and then by high-pitched peals of laughter. Adam and Jay breathed in the aromas of the food court: flavored coffees, barbecue, popcorn. Jay popped a free sample of tangy Cajun chicken into his mouth and savored its spicy taste.

The first store they went into was Technicalities, a little world of gleaming chrome, humming fluorescent tubes, and beeping electronic devices. There was a chair that gave back rubs; Adam giggled as its mechanical fingers tickled him. There was an electronic dart board with a computer that kept score with flashing green lights. There was a clock that had lips; when Jay touched it, a woman's voice—tinny, accentless—spoke the time to him.

Next they walked around the Total

Fitness store. They tried out the Sport Glider, a kind of motorized teeter-totter. It groaned under their weight at first, but was smooth and quick once it got going; both boys' stomachs were in their mouths when they finally stepped off. They staggered from there to Doggy Dog World, the pet store, where Jay talked the salesman into letting them play with a yapping, pink-tongued Westy whose high-pitched yelp filled the mall.

Their last stop was Athletic Action, where they tried on Packer jackets. Adam held one to his cheek; the silky satin was soft and cool against his skin...

### Write Now

- These sentences are like "The car went down the street":
  - Terri felt happy.
  - It was a cold winter.
  - The game was close.
  - My mother seemed angry.
  - The kids played in the yard.

Rewrite each so that it will evoke strong images.

- Visit a mall—or museum, exposition center, or other busy public place. Take notes on *specific* things you see. Write a few paragraphs recounting your adventures that will vividly re-create the place for a reader.

## Writing—Two Tips

like what they mean—are also very descriptive. From *murmur* and *mumble* to *crackle* and *creak*, they help readers see, hear, and feel what you are writing about. Which paints a picture: *The car went around the corner fast* or *The car screeched around the corner*?

How does the second version differ from the first? How do the details, including sensory details, make the story more real for readers? What images came to your mind when you read this version? What words created them?

Precise, descriptive language and specific details: Writers use both tools to help readers visualize what they describe—to show, rather than tell. ■

## ACTION

**ACTION** is one way of *showing* rather than *telling*. It brings a scene to life right in front of your reader's eyes.

**Look at this "telling" sentence:**

She was angry.

**Does it make you see anything?**

No, there's nothing to see. Somewhere, someone is angry, and we've been told about it. So what?

**But look at this "showing" scene:**

She kicked open the screen door, letting it slam against the porch wall as she dashed outside. Down the steps and into the yard she flew. Grabbing the first rock in her path, she hurled it back toward the house. It crashed through the living room window with an explosion of shattered glass.

Now you can see! Not once in that paragraph did I use the word "anger," but you knew that's what it was because you were right there, watching it happen.

## DIALOGUE

**DIALOGUE** is another way of *showing*.

**Listen to this:**

Dad and I disagreed about everything. We were always arguing.

**Hear anything?**

Nope. Whatever those two are arguing about is too far away. We're all familiar with fathers, and we've been in an argument or two. But we really don't know what's going on here, so it's hard to feel sympathetic.

**Listen again:**

"Dad, I can handle it," I said. "Ten hours a week at a job is just a couple of hours a day."

Dad put down his coffee cup and glared at me. "I said no job, Steve," he insisted. "You have your whole life to work. Or bum around with a band, if that's what you want to do. Right now, you study."

"I *do* study," I told him. "And I *will* study. I promise I won't let my grades slip. But that band is starting up *now*. I need that new snare drum *now*. I'm not even asking you to buy it for me. All I want is—"

Dad's fist hit the tabletop. "No job!" he shouted. "And no band! School comes first. And that's that!"

Hear anything now? I should think so! You've got a front row seat. And you have a clear picture of when and how these two argue and what about.

## SENSORY IMAGES

**SENSORY IMAGES** are a third way of *showing*.

**Picture this:**

Her room was a mess.

**Mean anything to you?**

Well, maybe. Most of us can picture a messy room. The trouble is the messy room I was thinking of when I wrote that sentence is not the same one you thought of when you read it.

Who's fault is that? Mine. I **TOLD** you about a messy room. I didn't **SHOW** you which one I meant.

**So, picture this:**

The needle stuck, trapping Bruce Springsteen in midshout, a kind of "wuh-huh, wuh-huh, wuh-huh" sound. On and on it went. Rick pounded on the wall and called his sister's name, but nothing stopped it.

He tried the doorknob. At first the door wouldn't budge. He pushed harder and managed to inch it forward. Peering through the crack, he realized a mound of jeans and tattered sweatshirts had formed a barricade holding the door shut. He could smell them, and sneakers, too, the unmistakable aroma of locker room sweat.

Shoulder to the task now, he managed to work his way inside. The spicy aroma of pepperoni pizza rose above the sneakers to tickle his nose and tongue. A cardboard box, empty except for a sprinkling of crumbs, lay atop a tangle of blankets on the bed.

Brad picked his way over the smelly clothes, a tennis racket, and a gaping gym bag. Edging around the dresser, he whacked his shin on an open drawer. But the rest was easy. Only a few textbooks, pencils, a calculator, and wads of notebook paper lay between him and the stereo in the corner. He set Bruce free.

"Peggy?" he whispered into the sudden silence. "Peggy, are you in here?" No answer. It's finally happened, he thought. The mess has swallowed her up whole.

**NOW** you're right where I want you, inside the exact room I wanted to **SHOW** you. How did I get you there? I invited you in by each of your five senses:

sight  
sound  
taste  
touch  
smell

Yes, it takes more words, more time, and more effort, but the results are worth it, don't you think? And if your stories seem to end almost as soon as they've begun, SDT could be the cure. What you've jotted down may be an outline, the telling of the story; you need to develop that outline by showing it, scene by living scene.

We experience the real world through our five senses, and we experience fictional worlds in the exact same way. The more a writer helps us see, hear, taste, touch, and smell an imagined world, the more real that world becomes.

**ACTION** is one way to engage the mind's eye. Getting characters to **DO** something sets a kind of

movie rolling in the reader's head. But fiction appeals to the sense of sight through **DESCRIPTION** as well: the shimmer of heat rising off a highway, the jagged contours of a seascape, the blue of a baby's eyes.

**DIALOGUE** appeals to an internal ear. And so do many other sounds: chimes at midnight, a knock on the door, footsteps echoing in a stairwell.

We'll deal further with description and dialogue in upcoming issues, so for now, let's concentrate on action. Here are a few ways to bring more of it into your stories.

**A.** This is a list of common, every day actions

- a wink
- a shrug
- a sneer
- a tapping foot
- an elbow nudge
- biting one's lip
- a wave of the hand
- a pat on the back
- holding hands
- a slap
- a jump

A wink might mean a secret is passing between two people. Or it might mean the winker has something in his eye. What else could a wink show?

A pat on the back might encourage someone to try harder. Or it might save someone from choking to death. What else?

Think of as many different ways as you can that each of these actions could be used to **SHOW** something. Then add other actions to your list and come up with uses for them. Don't stop with the first thing that comes to mind. Keep looking for more and more ways to put those actions to work.

**B.** Now, here's a list of common, every day feelings

- love
- grief
- anger
- fear
- joy
- jealousy
- boredom

What actions do people use to **SHOW** these feelings? What actions might you use if you were in a play and had to show the audience how your character felt without speaking?

Make a list of actions for each emotion. Think of both common and uncommon actions. We've already seen "throwing rocks" as a way of showing anger, but some people burst into tears when they're angry. Make as long a list for each emotion as you can, then list other emotions and do the same for them.

Now when you find yourself writing a "telling" statement like "She was angry," you can find ways to **SHOW** your readers exactly what you mean.

**C.** Try bringing some of the following dull examples of "telling" to life by showing one or more characters in action. Use **dialogue** and sensory images as well, if you feel they're appropriate, but make sure your characters are physically involved, doing something the reader can watch on that mental movie screen.

1. He really loves basketball
2. The kid was a brat.
3. Nothing I did went right.
4. He's always showing off
5. She was so nice to me
6. They ate like pigs

**SDT** has obvious advantages for your readers, but there's a subtle pay-off for you, the writer, as well. Bringing your characters and their world to life with action, dialogue, and sensory images *helps to get the story written.*

Say "She was angry" and the burden of figuring out what to write next is entirely on you. But have her heave a rock through a window and her **ACTION** is bound to bring on a number of **REACTIONS**—from the rock thrower herself, from the window owner, from neighbors, maybe from the police. All you have to do is watch, choose, and write down what happens—and **THAT** action will lead you to the next.

The same goes for dialogue. If someone speaks, someone else will answer, and the first person (or a third person) will have something to say about that. Often when I'm stuck somewhere in a story, I'll just let the characters talk to each other—about anything at all. If I listen long enough, they eventually reveal the next turn of the plot.

Sensory images also hold clues for the writer. When I began that messy room scene, all I wanted was an example of how sensory images might be used. I had no idea that Peggy was an athlete (the gym gear) or that she was having trouble with math (the calculator and crumpled notebook pages). Now did I know she was missing. All that was revealed to me as I created images to write down for you!

Well, how **DID** she get out of that room? Did she run away? Was she abducted by aliens? There's a story in that detailed heap of stuff, one you'd never notice in the vague "Her room was a mess."

**Action, dialogue, sensory images.** Open up those fictional worlds, for yourself and for your readers.

**SHOW; DON'T TELL!**