**7 Simple but Effective Tips for More Engaging, Persuasive Writing, Part 2**

adapted from *Jerz’s Literacy Weblog*,<http://jerz.setonhill.edu/writing/creative1/showing/>

***5) “Telling” states facts or observations. “Showing” invites much deeper understanding.***

**All the kids knew that Lucinda was the meanest kid in the third grade. She was prissy and cute, and she thought that meant she could get away with anything. She would always go out of her way to torment me. I wasn’t one of the “cool” kids, and the few kids I knew were just the guys I played chess with during recess — they weren’t really friends. Plus, I was clumsy. So I was a good target. She tormented me so much she made the third grade a living hell.**

Okay, we understand the author wants us to think Lucinda is mean, but we don’t actually see her *do* anything. Does the narrator have a good reason to fear Lucinda, or is the narrator a whiner-baby? There’s not enough information for us to know (or care).

**When the recess bell rang, I grabbed my chess set and dashed to freedom, eager to win the daily tournament of outcasts. I didn’t look, but I knew Lucinda was watching, I could feel her curly locks swaying as her head tracked me. Of course, I tripped in the doorway. Tennis shoes and sandals stepped around me as I scrambled after pawns and bishops. And there was Lucinda, waiting for me to notice her. She smiled, lifted her shiny patent-leather shoe, and slowly, carefully ground her heel right on the head of my white queen.**

Here, we read a detailed account of Lucinda’s behavior (she has a habit of going “after” the narrator; she waits until she has the narrator’s attention before crushing his queen), and we can judge for ourselves. Both passages make the same point, but the second does a much better job of engaging the reader.

The **second passage focuses in detail on one *specific* event**. Instead of simply calling himself clumsy (as in the first passage), the author shows us one specific occasion when he trips, and the writing brings us down to the ground with him, so that we see what he sees and feel what he feels.

The second passage never comes out and says “I didn’t have any friends,” but the fact that nobody stops to help the narrator makes us gather that the guy is an outcast. We learn quite a bit about the author in just that passage. Ultimately, there is no need to call Lucinda mean in the second passage, because that concept is conveyed effectively by the surprising detail of the shiny patent-leather shoe crushing the queen. There is no deadwood — it is packed with details, creating a more vivid emotional picture than the first one.

We actually learn something about Lucinda — she is not just being mean, **she wants the narrator’s attention, too**. Notice that she attacked the queen, of all pieces.Does she consider the chess set to be her competition?

EXERCIZE FIVE: Describe below an unpleasant interaction you had with another person, and describe that event in detail, carefully choosing the details you give to *show* us about you, the other person, and the situation without *telling* us your point. Type in your text below, and take as much space as you need.

***6) Showing Prefers the Specific to the General***

**“He looked at me in a way that wasn’t exactly threatening, but still made me uncomfortable.”**

This is just a fancier way of *telling* the reader a feeling by stating something that happened and spelling out exactly what effect it had on you. What, exactly, did this guy do with his eyes, face, and body that made you uncomfortable? Describe his actions, and show your reader exactly what made you uncomfortable. Did he waggle his eyebrows at you in a vaguely sensual manner? Did he stare directly at you while taking a gigantic bite out of a chicken wing, so that bits of cartilage crunched in his mouth as he chewed? Did he keep glancing up at a point just above your head, as if something was about to drop on you, and then laugh when you looked up to see for yourself?

**“Clearly, something must be done about this terrible crisis.”**

The words “clearly” or variations (“nobody can doubt that…” or “as we all know”) are often signs that the writer isn’t entirely sure the point that follows is persuasive enough. (I confess, I use such words myself, so they can’t be all bad… obviously.) Instead of just announcing that a certain thing is “terrible” or “horrendous” or “the most hideous thing you can possibly imagine” and expecting your reader to believe you, a good writer should present evidence (vivid examples) that lead the reader to conclude, on his or her own, that this thing is terrible.

EXERCIZE SIX: Give two or three followup showing sentences for the telling statements above. Tell us about the crisis (whatever it is) so that we think of it as “terrible” and realize that something must be done. Or describe that way “he” looked at the speaker above in a way that makes us (your reader) realize that she was uncomfortable but not exactly threatened.

***7) Sometimes, “Telling” Is Good***

When our goal is simply to inform, not to persuade or engage, TELLING does the job quite well — particularly if it’s part of an overall strategy. That’s the reason I didn’t call this handout “Show, Don’t Tell” — I called it “Show, Don’t (Just) Tell,” because it’s perfectly acceptable to TELL the minor details that add up to the point you want to SHOW. **In fact, it’s necessary to TELL.** For instance, in the opening example, I simply TOLD you that my brother modifies sports engines. I could have SHOWN his interest in cars instead: “His hands are grease-stained, he owns NASCAR posters, and on Saturday afternoons, he’s usually under his car.” But to SHOW you his interest in cars, I had to TELL you details about his hands, how he decorates his house, and what he does with his time. I carefully chose what details to TELL, expecting those details to add up in a meaningful way that SHOWS you something in an engaging way.

**“Our coach is a former champion wrestler, but now he is overpaid, overweight, and over forty.” –*Dena Taylor***

This example TELLS a string of details, carefully organized for humorous effect — and the speaker’s choice to present the coach this way gives us a glimpse of their relationship. Based on the speaker’s attitude, how do you think the team has been faring so far this season? What relationship does the speaker have with the coach? The combination of details and tone SHOW far more than what any individual detail TELLS. So this is an excellent use of TELLING minor details in order to SHOW a bigger point.

**“These are the times that try men’s souls.” –*Thomas Paine***

In stark contrast to the flowery language in political tracts designed for the nobility, Tom Paine uses stark, plain language to engage the common citizen. Later in the piece, he SHOWS with details exactly why he feels men’s souls are tried, and he persuades his audience what they should do about it. But here, he is TELLING something that the audience already agrees with, so that he can capture their attention and get them to listen to his bigger points.

**“I am your father.” — *Darth Vader***

The bluntness of this statement adds to the dramatic punch as Luke reacts to the news in “The Empire Strikes Back.”

EXERCIZE 7: Come up with a witty telling sentence like one of the examples above that you could use in your essay you are now writing—something that could fit into your argumentative or reflective essay. Make your sentence catchy and memorable, short and balanced in such a way that it is especially effective.