
WRITING FOCUS:

Show vs. Tell

At the Scene Level

with Beth and Ezra Barany

Barany School of Fiction

for the members of the Author Group Coaching Program

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Meditative Moment

Let's welcome in all of you, including
the parts that are quiet or active.





❖ How do we decide what to *tell* and what to *show*?



Reading is...

Immersive

Emotional

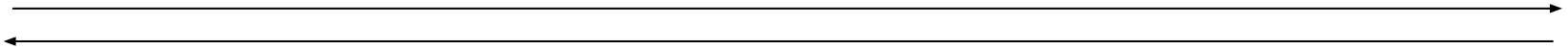
Stimulating

Transporting

Transformational

Educational

The Spectrum of Tell and Show



TELL

Exposition
Summarizing
Description

SHOW

Action Words
Thoughts
Senses
Feelings

We create that experience for the reader...

“... The goal is not to drown the reader in heavy-handed adjectives, but rather to allow readers to **interpret significant details** in the text.

-- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Show,_don't_tell



—

Let's dive into
showing you what
we mean! And how
to decide what to
use when.

Tell

Tell when recapping what reader had already seen in dialogue to another character: I told him how I ate three burritos and was attacked by a walrus.

Tell backstory in short spurts: Terrific. Her husband for three years was now ready to ruin her wedding to her new husband.

Tell uninteresting, but necessary, explanations: I drove for fifty minutes on the freeway to get to April's diner.

Show

Show when the character is in the moment. Show your scene.

Show the parts that are **crucial** to the unraveling of the plot and character arc.

A Scene is...

a sequence of continuous action in a play, movie,
opera, or book.

Levels of Show vs. Tell

Level 1: Pure Summary

Level 2: Summary + flourishes

Level 3: Showing a scene with an intermediate amount of detail.

Level 4: Showing with sensory details and internal monologue

Level 5: Showing with an extreme amount of detail - heartbeat by heartbeat.

(Thanks to Kyler Ann Ford, group member and Urban fantasy author, for this tip.)



Levels of Show vs. Tell

Level 1: Pure Summary

She went to the bar to talk to her contact.

Levels of Show vs. Tell

Level 2: Summary + flourishes

She went into the pub across town where she hoped to find her contact, but it didn't expect a fight.

Levels of Show vs. Tell

Level 3: Showing a scene with an intermediate amount of detail.

She walked into the pub, noting the crowd and the smell of beer. She searched for Jonathan, but didn't see him in the melee.

Levels of Show vs. Tell

Level 4: Showing with sensory details and internal monologue

What am I doing here? She wanted to be home in bed with her cat, but here she was in three degree weather in a crowd of drunks and cigarette smoke. The bar was dim and Jimmy was working the taps. etc.

Levels of Show vs. Tell

Level 5: Showing with an extreme amount of detail -
heartbeat by heartbeat.

From *Henrietta and the
Battle of the Horse Mesa*
by Beth Barany (Book 3)

“Ready?” Franc said behind her.

She spun, her sword poised. “You’re late.”

He crouched. “You’re in high spirits.” He stepped into her, testing.

She danced to one side. “Leoni finally let me out of training. Those robes.”

She shook her head.

“I think you look—”

She silenced him with a glare and stepped-feinted with her left foot and swung her sword from the right.

He caught it in time and countered easily with a quick spin to the left and a slice toward her middle.

Levels of Show vs. Tell

From Kyler Ann Ford:

“[For me] most stories will be a mix of level 2 (for transitions and non-important moments), level 3 & 4 for a majority of scenes, with the detail increasing as the intensity increases. Less common is level 1 when you have to tell straight up [and] tell them something to get into more interesting moments, and level 5 at the most intense scenes when the character is in peril and every single little detail is included.”

How to decide when to show and when to tell



- What is your natural level(s)?
- When do you need to increase the intensity (go up in levels) and when do you need to cut what's boring?

Reflection and Next Steps

1. What did you discover today? Your ah-has?

2. What is your next step you want to take in your author life and work?
