

showing and telling

*Telling* consists of summarizing with the use of abstract words and phrases.

example: Noland fell into a pile of garbage.

*Showing* involves giving the reader the illusion of seeing, hearing, touching, etc. through use of concrete sensual imagery.

example: Noland tripped on the hulk of a rusted-out bicycle and fell headlong upon an assortment of decomposing organic matter: potato peelings, melon rinds, bananas black with age, plus several items he could identify only as rotten and maggot-infested.

Telling is useful for giving important background information. In most short stories, telling is a necessary evil. Strive to avoid telling as much as possible. When you must tell in order to get in crucial exposition, take the edge off the evil by using the following guidelines:

1. Keep the passage short.
2. Scatter the telling across passages of showing; avoid including large lumps of telling by interspersing short passages of exposition among the showing.
3. Check each passage of telling to see if you can leave it out or if you might strengthen the story by showing. Show scenes that have the potential for good drama.
4. Include specific details when possible; avoid telling with only abstract words.

Examples of telling without use of details:

1. The note on the scroll made no sense. She couldn't even read it.
2. How could anyone murder a turtle dove? she wondered, even as she thought of the likely culprit. The same person who had left other bizarre items on her door and in her mailbox.

Revised to tell with the use of detail, these two passages might read:

1. The note on the scroll looked like squiggles that a secretary might write in shorthand.
2. How could anyone murder a turtle dove? she wondered, even as she thought of the likely culprit. The same person who left the hand-carved rosary, the page from an oriental book, a rock crystal, chicken feet, and a voodoo doll stabbed with a pin.