

“Picture This: Classroom Activities for *Show, Don’t tell* Writing”

By

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Which story would you like to read? One that begins like this:

One day, Sharon, who is eleven and in the sixth grade, got up to get ready for school. Sharon likes soccer, comic books, and rap, and she hates cleaning her room. When she can’t find her kneepads because she’s so disorganized, she gets worried about getting to the state championship game on time.

Or, this one:

Sharon lay on her floor pulling stuff out from underneath her bed. Out flew her math book, last year’s fifth-grade report on reptiles, some old CD cases, and a few *Doonesbury* comic books. “Where are those stupid knee pads?” she muttered. How was she going to help win the state championship if she couldn’t find her knee pads?

The answer is obvious.

Writing that *shows*, not *tells*, brings a character and a scene to life; it uses verbs and nouns to add specific details and creates images in the reader’s mind; it adds vim and vigor by using accurate similes and metaphors. If those aren’t enough reasons, writing that *shows*, not *tells*, is also more fun to read and write.

How do you teach your students this cardinal rule of writing that authors live and breathe by? How do you train your students to replace narrative writing that simply chronicles events with lively writing that paints crystal-clear word pictures?

Use three role models that your students look to everyday: authors, you, and their peers.

Students Learn from the Best

The first group to model this *show, don’t tell* principle is the authors of the stories and novels your students are reading. Consider the following examples:

The day was hot. Steamy. Janina and I were down near the entrance to the cemetery, on Gesia Street. We were watching the long parade of wagons lined up at the gate. The wagons were pulled by men-horses. The bodies were in heaps. The number of them was much higher

than I could count at the time. A peppery cloud of flies hovered over the flopped arms and legs. The air buzzed.

Only a few living people came with the wagons. Except for the rags they wore and the fact that they were standing, they looked like the bodies. (Spinelli, p. 138)

In this vivid description of the Warsaw Ghetto, Spinelli not only shows the reader what Misha, the main character, sees (parade of wagons, the men-horses, heaps of dead bodies, a cloud of flies, the barely alive living), but the reader also feels the heat and hears the flies buzzing (a great example of onomatopoeia). Spinelli's metaphors and similes augment the image: "men-horses" and people that, "Except for the rags they wore...they looked like the bodies" paint a vivid picture for the reader.

Consider this second passage from *Blue*, a middle-grade novel about the polio epidemic in 1944 in Hickory, North Carolina.

When Daddy declared war on the wisteria, I was afraid he would kill it all off. But he said he couldn't kill it if he tried.

"Ann Fay," he said, "that vine is just like you. It's mighty pretty, but it's also determined. It would take a powerful strong enemy to destroy either one of you."

I wanted to believe him. But now that Daddy was off to fight a real war, I felt destroyed already. (Hostetter, p.18.)

Hostetter doesn't *tell* the reader about Ann Fay's character, ("Ann Fay was a determined, pretty young girl"), instead she *shows* her through her father's simile comparing her to the ever-present wisteria vine. The underlying metaphor of warfare is emphasized by the vivid verb *destroyed*, gripping the reader and showing Ann Fay's feelings. The author's choice of adjectives (*mighty pretty, powerful strong*), doesn't tell the reader, "Ann Fay's father was proud of his daughter and spoke with a southern drawl," but shows it through deliberate word choice.

In this scene from *Cecelia's Adventure*, a North Carolina revolutionary war story, notice the figurative language the author employs:

Cecelia laid her [baby] on a quilt on the floor...She dozed, only to wake at the sound of roaring wind. She heard the giant sucking noise of the maple roots as they tore from the ground. The tree sighed as it fell. Its massive branches embraced the kitchen porch....She prayed the glass panes would hold against the scraping of the wood. She waited, her head pillowed next to her child. (Blonnie Wyche, p. 106)

This passage exemplifies personification as the *trees sigh* and the *branches embrace the kitchen porch*. Using this passage in the classroom, you could also point out the author's use of vivid verbs: the roots *tore from the ground*; Cecelia's head *pillowed next to her child*. Wyche didn't

say, "In spite of the storm outside, Cecelia rested next to her baby"; she showed the storm through figurative language and explicit verbs.

Changing genres, consider this fourth passage:

On this particular Thursday, something was moving quietly through the ionosphere many miles above the surface of the planet: several somethings in fact, several dozen huge yellow chunky slablike somethings, huge as office blocks, silent as birds. They soared with ease, basking in electromagnetic rays from the star Sol, biding their time, grouping, preparing. (Adams, p. 26.)

Adams gives the reader a vivid word picture of alien *somethings* that are *yellow*, *chunky*, and *slablike*, *huge as office blocks*, *silent as birds*. Each of these adjectives and similes provides specific details and contributes to the overall picture. Like the other authors examined, Adams' choice of verbs enhances the description of the scene. The "somethings" *soared*, *basked*, *bided*, *grouped*, and *prepared*. The reader is hooked—what will happen next?

First Activity

Create a transparency of a few paragraphs from a novel or story your students are reading. Put the writing sample on the overhead, document reader, or interactive whiteboard, and ask students to identify the specific verbs, nouns, similes, or metaphors the author used to paint a word picture.

Next, ask students to rewrite the paragraph substituting tired words, such as general nouns and over-used verbs, and eliminating the author's vivid details. Students can also begin each sentence with "it" or "and then" and never vary the sentence length. Encourage them to substitute adjectives that produce strong images with overused adjectives such as "awesome," "cool," or "beautiful," which don't provide the reader with detailed information. They will laugh as they recognize their own non-descript writing.

Other instructors also "deconstruct" a novel to demonstrate to their students the difference between weak and powerful writing. Children's author, Suzanne Williams models this concept on her website and in classrooms.

If E.B. White had *told* us the opening to *Charlotte's Web*, he might have written it this way:

Fern was in the kitchen when she saw her father go by with an ax. She wondered what he was doing with it. Her mother told her he was going to do away with a pig that had been born too small. Fern was upset because she didn't think a pig should be killed just because it was smaller than other pigs.

Instead, White *showed* us what was happening through effective use of dialogue and description. (Williams, p 1.)

After modeling this activity to your students, ask them to pick a paragraph from a favorite book that *shows* rather than *tells*. After copying it on an overhead or writing it on the board, students can lead the class in identifying the elements that bring specific images to readers' minds. You can also use a document camera to take a picture of the student's selection, project it onto the interactive whiteboard, and allow the student to highlight the author's *show, don't tell* passages. As you do this with both narrative and expository writing samples, you promote critical-thinking skills. Your students must recognize and analyze what constitutes stellar writing and then teach it to their peers.

Students Learn from You

Second Activity

Write a simple sentence on the overhead, such as "The boy ate his lunch." Discuss how even adding adjectives such as *small* boy or *delicious* lunch still leaves the sentence vague and unspecific. How can the writer jazz this up?

Ask your students to substitute specific nouns and verbs without changing the basic meaning of the sentence. For example, by replacing *boy* with *toddler*, *refugee*, or *skater dude*; substituting *eat* with *devour*, *savored*, or *picked at*; and choosing a *cheeseburger*, *pizza*, *bread crust*, or *chicken leg*, the writer creates a more specific image.

Similarly, ask the class to think of a simile or metaphor that would make this character memorable. Writing, "The skater dude devoured the pizza like an eagle swooping down on a rat" or, "The Haitian refugee savored the crust of bread as if it was a gourmet meal" are almost as clear as photographs.

The goal of this activity is to enhance the sentence without losing its basic meaning. Your students might enjoy ending up with, "The tiger inhaled the monkey," but they will have lost the point of this exercise.

Professor Emeritus at Rowan University, Jane Sullivan, reinforces *show don't tell* writing by adding movement. Working with fourth-graders, she acts out scenes from a passage of a book (one of her favorites is *Autumn Street* by Lois Lowry) thus demonstrating the power of vivid verbs to create specific images. Flipping the activity on its head, she also takes a non-descript sentence and attempts to act it out. Here is a sentence she wrote on the overhead:

Mary spilled her can of soda.

"This time," I said to my students, "I want you to help me change the sentence so that it shows us what happened."

Pretending I was Mary, I acted out the movements students told me they thought probably made the soda spill. When I felt their suggestions were vague or illogical, I asked them lots of questions.

"Where would the soda be?" I asked one student.

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"On the table," was the answer.

"So, then how did it spill?" I challenged.

Students changed their minds and decided it was in her hand.

"Which hand? What did she do to make the soda spill? Then what happened?" I countered.

As a logical progression of movements or actions emerged, I recorded them on the transparency. The result was a new paragraph and once again, we found the movement words and underlined them in red.

*Mary **stood** with a can of soda in her left hand. She **leaned** over to take a cupcake out of the fridge but **tripped** over that crack in the tile floor. The soda **spilled** down her new white dress.* (Sullivan, p.1.)

Nancie Atwell, in her book, *In the Middle*, argues that writers need to carefully select the adjectives and adverbs they employ. She maintains that *show, don't tell* writing should further the author's purpose:

"Good writers ...let us see people and ideas in action rather than depend on qualifiers. They give us specifics: strong nouns, precise verbs, actions we can see and hear, reactions we can feel. An apple is big, red, round, crisp, shiny, and juicy. Unless this is a commercial for McIntosh apples, so what? Instead, a writer would try to show something about the apple only if there's something to be shown—if a quality of the apple reflects some meaning in the sentence or story. For example: *I gobbled the green apples, I found in the clearing.* Now we have specific: hunger, unripe apples, a forest setting: now the apple beings to have a significance we can understand (Atwell, p. 165).

As you model this, your students will see that the writing process is not stagnant. Good writers search for the best word to convey their meaning without settling for vague, inaccurate descriptions. In fact, to arrive at *show, don't tell* writing, writers must often travel through many rounds of revision.

Nancy Dean, the author of *Discovering Voice*, gives teachers three concrete tools for teaching *show, don't tell* writing. She encourages teachers to focus on diction, detail, and figurative language: "Diction refers to the author's choice of words...The perfect word is clear, concrete, and exact. In other words, it says exactly what you want it to say, is specific, and creates just the picture you see in your mind." (Dean, p. 8.)

"Detail includes facts, observations, reasons, examples, and incidents that a writer uses to develop a subject. Specific details create a clear mental picture for the reader by focusing on particulars rather than abstractions" (Dean, p. 22). In other words, when a student writes, "My vacation was loads of fun and I did lots of new things," prompt him to include specific details by asking probing questions. "Where did you go and what did you do that was fun? Who was with you? Did you see, taste, hear, or smell something that you had never experienced before? What did it feel like to be trying out something new?"

Figurative language, such as similes, metaphors, personification, onomatopoeia, and alliteration, is another device to muscle up writing. "We use figurative language because it's a rich, strong, and vivid way to express meaning." (Dean, p. 35)

Students Learn from Each Other

Third Activity

With a partner, each student writes one or two "blah" or boring sentences. Partners must "jazz it up" by replacing nondescript verbs with vivid verbs, substituting specific nouns for general nouns, and by adding figurative language. They should try to include sensory information that allows the reader to see, feel, or hear what is being described. For example, a student could write, "The driver honked the horn. He was impatient for the traffic to move." His partner could change it to "The teenager blared the VW's horn. He drummed his fingers on the steering wheel, leaned out the window, and yelled "Can you move any slower?"

Repeat this activity with different partners or in small groups. In a group, each student passes his boring sentences to the person sitting next to him who crosses out just one noun or verb and replaces it with a more vivid word or phrase before passing it along to the next person for further revision. Give students several minutes to complete this activity and ask the last person to add a simile or metaphor. Allow the sentence to return to the original writer so students can see how their writing was revised and "jazzed up." You might need to remind students again not to change the meaning of the original sentence.

If you do this activity on a wiki (see sidebar), there is the added advantage of students seeing how different groups of their peers rewrite the same, nondescript sentence. The wide variety of interpretations shows students how imprecise, written language does not communicate a clear message or image to the reader.

Using a wiki, several middle-school classes in Rockingham, North Carolina played with these sentences with humorously different results:

The man went to the store. He couldn't find what he wanted, so he left.

Group 1 revision: ~~The man~~ **Zavier went roller-skated to the store Wal-mart.** He couldn't find ~~what he was looking for~~ **Kraft's Peppercorn Ranch on sale, so he left so he stormed all the way home.**

Group 2 revision: ~~The man went~~ **homeless man crawled out of his box, and wobbled to Wal-Mart.** ~~to the store. He couldn't find what he wanted~~ **begged for change, but he had no luck. So he left took off back to his box, crying.**

Group 3 revision: ~~The~~ **wrinkled man went limped to the Vision Center store. He was almost blind so he couldn't find** ~~identify his new pair of glasses what he wanted,~~ **so he left because the eye doctor was on a lunch break.**

Here is a second example:

Mr. Hoffman was happy. He had gotten a visit from a friend who had been gone for a long time.

Group 1 revision: Mr. Hoffman was ~~happy~~ **jumping with joy**. He had ~~gotten~~ **received** a visit from a **college roommate** who had been ~~gone~~ **missing** for a ~~long time~~ **11 years**.

Group 2 revision: Mr. Hoffman was ~~happy~~ ~~excited~~ **jumping up and down!** He had ~~gotten~~ **received a special** visit from a his ~~best~~ **strange friend, Billy Bob Tim Joe Smith** who had been gone for a ~~long time~~ **centuries**.

A third example:

Raymond went outside. He saw something that made him feel strange.

Group 1 revision: Raymond ~~went~~ **jogged to past school** ~~outside~~ **from his moms**. He ~~saw~~ **heard something a noise** that ~~made~~ **went chicka chicka bom bom** and made him feel strange.

Group 2 revision: Raymond ~~went~~ **jogged** ~~outside~~ **in the scary woods**. He ~~saw~~ **glanced at a bear that made him strange pass out**.

Group 3 revision: Raymond **the scientist flipped in joy at the park**. He saw a **4 headed monkey** that made him feel **ecstatic**.

In the End

You can incorporate these simple activities into your lesson plans for writing fiction or poetry or into your writing workshops for any grade level. Students will also have fun practicing *show, don't tell* writing in their expository pieces. For example, if your students are studying the Revolutionary War in their social studies class, ask them to compose some simple boring sentences. Perhaps one student volunteers, "The soldier shot the enemy, who fell down dead." After you request that students supply specific details, this sentence could end up being "The British Lieutenant aimed his Brown Bess musket at the approaching blue coat. With accuracy borne of years of practice, his shot started with a loud roar and ended with the young Boston lad keeled over as blood gushed from his stomach."

Similarly, *show, don't tell* writing can beef up boring science reports. "The worm was long" can become "The American earthworm measures 9 cm, which is about as long as my index finger." "I thought the chemical reaction was strange" could be transformed into "The gray liquid steamed and bubbled, and I smelled an odor like rotten eggs emitting from the beaker."

When your students replace tired words with vivid verbs and change boring nouns into specific nouns their writing will be clearer. As they add image-driven details, knock-your-socks-off similes, or dynamite metaphors, they will notice that their writing grabs the reader by the collar and doesn't let go.

And hopefully, your students' future writing will leave dull soccer players home in bed and put their teammates out on the field where they'll be sweating, grunting, kicking, and knocking over the other players in their excitement to be *seen* and *heard* by their readers.

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