

Name: _____

Date: _____

SHOW, DON'T TELL! : EXAMPLE ARTICLE

Writing Workshop #1

Snapshots do more for your dialogue than to simply eliminate those pesky 'said' tags. They also allow you to continuously remind the readers of your visual setting, so that you can create the effect of seeing and hearing that conversation simultaneously, just as we do in real life. When a novice writer creates dialogue with no visual details, the readers begin to hear people talking in a gray fog, creating what is called a 'talking heads' scene. Readers quickly forget where we are and what we see unless reminded regularly.

In addition, a character's body language – those small physical movements and facial expressions – reveals his or her emotional state. The character's emotional state not only affects the meaning of what he or she says, it also colors that person's tone.

Let's look at an example:

"Hi," Jane said. "Nice to see you."

"How long has it been?" Daren asked. "Two years?"

"More like three," Jane admitted. "How have you been?"

"Okay," Daren responded. "I missed you, you know. You didn't leave me any note or anything. You just left."

"Yeah," Jane said awkwardly. "You know. I was just reacting."

So here we have a conversation between Jane and Daren. Obviously this has some emotional intensity. These people haven't seen each other for quite some time and we find out that Jane left suddenly and Daren missed her. Perhaps they were romantically involved. However we have to fill in a lot of the emotional tone here on our own. Is Daren angry? Is Jane embarrassed? Or is Daren hurt? Maybe Jane is afraid of him, he was an abusive boyfriend? We don't know. We are guessing what the situation might be and then filling in a lot of blanks in terms of the character emotions. We readers are doing all the work here – and we might get it wrong. We might completely misinterpret the author's intention here.

What do we see here? Nothing. This might be taking place in Daren's living room, in a bus station, or the street, in Jane's kitchen. Notice that 'said' only occurs twice, but instead we have 'asked, admitted, and responded. The author has to tell us that Jane is speaking awkwardly in that final line. Otherwise we won't know what her tone of voice is.

Let's try this scene again, setting it on a downtown street, in front of a department store, in the bustle of a Christmas shopping weekend. This time, we'll give Jane and Daren some specific emotional reaction to the conversation.

Let's look at the BETTER example:

"Hi." Jane clutched her armload of gift wrapped packages, her expression stiff. "Nice to see you."

"How long has it been?" Daren stepped closer, blocking her path to the bus stop. "Two years?"

"More like three." Snowflakes began to dapple hair and she peered over his shoulder into the rush of traffic, obviously searching for her bus. "How have you been?"

"Okay." Daren shrugged. She didn't really want to know. "I missed you, you know." He stepped sideways, so that she had to look at him. "You didn't leave me any note or anything. You just left."

"Yeah." She looked away, her lips tight. "You know. I was just reacting."

Here we have a few visual hints of the busy street and the season – gift wrapped packages, a bus stop, a rush of traffic, snow falling. So readers will have no trouble visualizing a familiar city street crowded with holiday shoppers. It's winter. It's a city. Each reader will fill in a much more complete landscape from his or her own experience.

The action included in the exchange also implies the emotional state of the characters. Remember how we had infer all the emotion that had to lurk between those terse dialogue lines? Now the emotion is much more obvious. Jane clutches her armload of gifts and her expression is stiff: *she is nervous or anxious*. Daren steps closer, blocking her path to the bus stop: *he expects her to try and avoid him, or he's confronting her*. He shrugs: *He's not really okay*. He steps sideways so that she has to look at him. *He's forcing her to pay attention to him even though she's trying to avoid doing so*. She looks away, lips tight. *She's upset, feeling uncomfortable*.

Because we see enough body language to suggest the characters' emotional state, we don't need any adverbs to describe tone of voice. So the *She said awkwardly* is no longer needed. We hear Daren's intense tone as he says, *You didn't leave me a note or anything. You just left*. He has been hurt and we hear that hurt in his voice but he's also acting aggressively here, forcing her to pay attention to him. So we'll hear a note of anger in his voice along with his hurt.

This version even includes a brief bit of internal narrative: *She didn't really want to know*. This is Daren's own thought. He's aware, as he answers her polite question that she doesn't really want to know how he has been.