Specificity, imagery in writing:  
*Testing the effects of “Show, Don’t Tell”*

by James Tankard & Laura Hendrickson

Sentences that *show* are usually perceived by readers as more interesting, engaging and informative than sentences that merely *tell*.

A frequently offered piece of advice about writing is *Show, don’t tell.*

Melvin Mencher, in *News Reporting and Writing*, says: “We might start with Tolstoy who, in describing the strength of his masterwork *War And Peace*, said, ‘I don’t tell; I don’t explain. I show; I let my characters talk for me.’”¹

Mencher goes on to say:

> One of the reporter’s first writing rules might be: *Show, don’t tell.* Telling makes readers passive. Showing engages readers by making them draw the conclusions, see the significance of the facts the writer presents. Good writers let the words and actions of the participants do the work.²

William Noble, in his advice to fiction writers, says: “Why show and not tell? By and large, readers pick up a book to be entertained, and there’s little entertainment value in being told what they are reading.”³

This study was designed to investigate the effectiveness of the *Show, don’t tell* advice for writers. An experiment was conducted in which the same sentences were presented to some readers in a *show* version and other readers

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in a *tell* version. Differences in reader interest, engagement, and other qualities were then measured with semantic differential scales as a means of assessing the impact of *showing* rather than *telling*.

**The importance of *showing***

Noble emphasizes the importance of using specific and visual language to create "word-pictures." He says:

> There are a lot of adjectives to describe writing which touches the reader and creates a word-picture: vigorous, vivid, sensuous, sentimental, challenging. Writing like this brings a story to life, and there is a singular reason for it. The writer has injected drama, he or she has made things happen and has tickled the imagination.... We must never be far from the drama through because this is where we get the food for "showing" instead of "telling."  

The specificity and imagery called for by *showing* often may be missing in journalistic writing. As Carol A. Turkington, has said:

> I slowly and painfully learned that creating an article with some color didn't mean I'd sold my journalistic soul. It meant I'd found it. I learned that my job as a writer is not just to string together a bunch of facts and phrases, but to weave a sensual tapestry of sights and sounds that help readers not simply to know, but to understand.  

Successful fiction and nonfiction writer Tom Wolfe, in his discussion of the *New Journalism*, says:

> If you follow the progress of the New Journalism closely through the 1960's, you see an interesting thing happening. You see journalists learning the techniques of realism - particularly of the sort found in Fielding, Smollett, Balzac, Dickens and Gogol - from scratch. By trial and error, by "instinct" rather than theory, journalists began to discover the devices that gave the realistic novel its unique power, variously known as its "immediacy," its "concrete reality," its "emotional involvement," its "gripping" or "absorbing" quality.  

It should be noted that the emphasis on *showing* in writing has caused some writers to speak up in defense of the art of *telling*. Carol-Lynn Marrazzo
reminds us that abandoning telling for the sake of exclusively showing can cause a reader to feel “distanced.” She calls for a combination of showing and telling to draw the reader in.

**Explicating showing versus telling**

*Showing* rather than *telling* can be accomplished in a variety of ways. The following aspects of the *show, don't tell* advice were identified:

- **Be concrete.** Doug Newsom and the late James Wollert, in advising writers to be concrete, recommended using “steak and beer” instead of “sustenance.” The authors note that problems often arise not from a word’s unfamiliarity, but from its level of abstraction. They say:

> ...all words, to some degree, are abstract. But the closer the word is to something visual, something real, the easier the word will be to understand. Good writers prefer words that give the reader something to see... . Good writing is characterized by concrete nouns and action words.

William Strunk and E.B. White, in *The Elements of Style*, tell us that good writing is concrete and specific; it calls up pictures for the reader. And calling up pictures is one way to show, rather than tell. Strunk and White say:

> If those who have studied the art of writing are in accord on any one point, it is on this: the surest way to arouse and hold the attention of the reader is by being specific, definite, and concrete. The greatest writers - Homer, Dante, Shakespeare - are effective largely because they deal in particulars and report the details that matter. Their words call up pictures.

The authors offer the example that the sentence “A period of unfavorable weather set in” is not as effective as “It rained every day for a week.”

Concrete language is at the lower levels of the “abstraction ladder” described by S.I. Hayakawa. He gives an example: “Mrs. Levin makes good potato pancakes” is at a lower level of abstraction than “The culinary art has reached a high state in America.”

- **Be specific.** Newsom and Wollert say that when general statements are used, they should be backed up by specific examples to make the communication clear. For instance, they recommend “The audience stood and applauded for five minutes” rather than “He was a big hit with the audience.” They also offer the following example:
Consider this sentence: “People in the village eat a lot of fruit.” The sentence is clear enough, but it is general. “Every villager eats two pounds of bananas, peaches and apples daily” is specific.¹⁴

Other authors have written about the need for specificity in writing. Noble says that specificity is essential in appealing to the senses. He also says, “Keep things specific, and what do we have? Imagery which becomes drama which becomes showing.”¹⁵

Barnaby Conrad, in an article about “the four deadly sins of description,” sums up the fourth deadly sin: Don’t generalize - Be specific. He calls this Chekhov’s Golden Rule and asks the writer not to say the sky was “sort of bluish,” but to say that it was “like the sky in a child’s painting, the same deep blue from top to bottom.”¹⁶

Does such specificity take too much space for a newspaper article? Specificity need not always take more space. Conrad says:

...remember when you sit down to write it is: not a drink but a martini; not a dog but a poodle; not a flower but a rose; not a sleigh but a Rosebud; not a hat but a borsolino; not a cat but an Abyssinian; not a gun but a .44 Colt on a frontier frame; not a painting but Manet’s “Olympia.”¹⁷

William Blundell says that some words and phrases are “blobs,” and that others are “paintbrushes whose narrow meanings instantly create pictures in the reader’s mind. They are specific and concrete, not general and abstract.”¹⁸

• Use language that appeals to the senses. Showing implies that we appeal to the senses. When we show people something, we give them a visual image. We appeal to their sense of sight and create what Noble calls “a picture forged from our words.” Noble, says writers “need help in learning how to develop word-pictures for readers.”¹⁹

Roberts has said, “It took me years to appreciate it, but there is no better admonition to the writer than ‘Make me see.’”²⁰

But we can appeal to other senses as well. Ellen Kindt McKenzie, in an article about writing fiction for children, said, “Recall sights and sounds, tastes and smells. Be brief. Choose words that are graphic.”²¹

• Use quotes or dialogue. Noble, who calls it dialogue because he’s talking about fiction, says, “Good dialogue ... serves a useful purpose because it carries dramatic impact, it shows rather than tells, and the reader can get
immediately involved." Wolfe says dialogue is the single most effective device for establishing character. Art Spikol, in a discussion of nonfiction writing, says it is “very difficult to instill life into characters without using what they themselves use to communicate: their own words.”

- **Use figures of speech.** Similes, metaphors and other literary devices can bring vividness to writing. Some writers choose to show by using metaphors to create a visual image, as in this line from a National Geographic story about Cyprus: “Time stands still along narrow Hermes Street, which slashes across the center of the Old City of Nicosia like a deep wound that has never healed.” Noble, while cautioning that metaphors and similes not be overused, calls for the writer to use them skillfully and says, “Comparing and contrasting images is what similes and metaphors do, and the purpose is to build up that word-picture and clarify it. To show it, not tell it.”

- **Write in terms of action or narrative.** Conrad explains his first deadly sin of description this way: “Don’t let your description, no matter how beautifully written, bring your narrative to a halt.” But not just any narrative will do. Noble says that “narrative is the heart of storytelling” and is “what sweeps us along.” But he adds:

> Where the drama slips away, the narrative becomes lecture instead of storytelling, and the reader loses that all-important word-picture.

- **Use strong verbs.** Strong verbs can lead to greater specificity, and thus to showing. Martin Gibson, in The Writer’s Friend, concedes that the verb “is” does the job “properly on occasion” but that:

> We have no weaker verb than is. Any professional writer can find something stronger than that. Your vocabulary surely contains a livelier verb that tells us something occurs, that something acts, that something happens.

With his examples, Gibson also shows that stronger verbs can lead to greater specificity throughout the sentence. For example, the sentence “Farmers in this area are poor” becomes “Farmers in this area don’t have enough money to buy this year’s seed.” The second sentence shows, rather than tells.

Many of the authors cited above seem to view showing as involving the related aspects of concreteness, appeals to the senses, and specificity of language. This study will focus on showing defined in terms of these factors.
Related studies

Several authors in the field of general semantics have examined the role of specific and concrete language in communication. For instance, Hayakawa has presented his *Ladder of Abstraction* and noted that abstraction is largely a process of leaving out detail.\(^\text{(3)}\) Hayakawa further warns that one of the effects of high-level abstraction can be to confuse the reader. As noted in the previous discussion of *showing* versus *telling*, writing that involves *telling* typically involves presenting conclusions, while writing that involves *showing* presents observed details and allows readers to draw their own conclusions.

Hayakawa further states that one of the consequences of writing in terms of conclusions rather than observed facts is to stop thought.\(^\text{(3)}\) For instance, he points out that "He is a fine boy" is a conclusion that sums up a large number of previously observed facts and leaves little more to be said.

An experiment by Lewis Donohew demonstrated that punchy verbs and adjectives can have an effect on the arousal levels of readers.\(^\text{(3)}\) This study showed that small changes in language can lead to differences in responses from readers.

In terms of method, the present study is similar to some experimental studies of the semantic effects of word combinations undertaken by Charles Osgood and colleagues.\(^\text{(34)}\) These authors used the semantic differential to investigate the connotative meaning of word combinations such as *aggressive leader* or *treacherous nurse*. Similarly, Jean Kerrick conducted experiments in which she changed a single word in the captions of photographs and then used the semantic differential to examine the effect on the general reaction to the photograph.\(^\text{(35)}\)

These prior studies focusing on the effects of word combinations and captions demonstrate that small changes in language can have verifiable effects. They also show that it is reasonable to attempt to investigate the effects of language with small samples of verbal material such as sentences.

Theoretical rationale

The present study was designed to investigate a number of possible effects of language that *shows* rather than *tells*. The general discussion of *showing* versus *telling* summarized above suggests that one of the main effects of *showing* language might be to make writing more interesting, engaging, entertaining, attention-arousing, or gripping.\(^\text{(36)}\)

Furthermore, an argument can be made that *show* language should make writing more credible or believable. *Show* language could be expected to
be more believable because telling often presents the writer’s conclusions without supporting detail. For instance, writers who are telling might say that a concert was terrific, that a view was awesome, or that an accident was tragic. Readers should find these conclusions drawn by the writer to be less objective, and therefore less believable, than writing that shows by reporting specific, concrete details. An article written about nonfiction writer John McPhee provides some testimony about the link between concrete details and believability. The piece states that “McPhee has a passion for details, for they convince readers that he deals in actualities.”37

It also seems logical that show sentences compared with tell sentences might have an effect on the perceived clarity of writing, although it is difficult to predict what that effect might be. Newsom and Wollert and others suggest that specific, concrete language makes writing clearer by giving the reader something to visualize, indicating that show sentences should be clearer. On the other hand, show sentences sometimes will be longer, and research on readability suggests that longer sentences typically are more difficult to read.38

Finally, it is likely that show sentences compared with tell sentences might have an effect on how informative writing is perceived to be. An argument can be made that show sentences are more informative because they provide more detailed information, but, again, if a sentence gets too long because of added detail, it could become less readable, and thus less informative. At least one author suggests that showing isn’t always enough if a writer wants to convey a character’s thoughts or feelings and that showing-only writing can feel “distanced” to the reader.39 As with perceived clarity, it is difficult to predict the direction of the effect of showing language on perceived informativeness.

These considerations led to the development of the following hypotheses and research questions:

**Hypotheses**

1. Show sentences will be seen by readers as more interesting than tell sentences.
2. Show sentences will be seen as more believable than tell sentences.

**Research questions**

1. Which is perceived as more clear, a show sentence or tell sentence?
2. Which is perceived as more informative, a show sentence or a tell sentence?
Method

An experiment was designed to present the same sentences to some participants in a show version and to other participants in a tell version. Ten sentences were presented. Two experimental packets were prepared so that a sentence that appeared in a show version in one packet would appear in a tell version in the other packet. In each packet, show and tell sentences alternated.

Each sentence was followed by six semantic differential scales selected to measure the dependent variables specified in the hypotheses and research questions. The packet also contained some questions about the subjects' frequency of reading daily newspapers, magazines and books, and their gender.

Packets of the two types were arranged in a random order and passed out to students in selected journalism classes. Participants were asked to give their honest reaction to the sentences. They were shown how to use the rating scales by means of an example on the blackboard. In addition, they were informed that the people sitting next to them might not have the same questionnaire, and that they should concentrate on their own packets.

Experimental materials

Recent issues of several popular magazines (Reader's Digest, the New Yorker, National Geographic, National Wildlife, and Guideposts) were searched for examples of show sentences, or sentences containing specific, concrete language that appealed to the senses. These show sentences were rewritten so there was a tell sentence for each show sentence. The tell sentences were produced by stripping out specific, concrete language and replacing it with more general terms. Ten pairs of sentences were used in the experiment. The sentences are presented in Table 1.

Six semantic differential scales were selected to measure the dependent variables specified in the hypotheses and research questions. Two scales were selected to measure the dependent variable specified in each of the two hypotheses and one scale was selected to measure the dependent variable in each of the two research questions.

The quality of interestingness mentioned in Hypothesis 1 was measured with the scales interesting-dull and engaging-unengaging. The quality of believability mentioned in Hypothesis 2 was measured with the scales objective-subjective and believable-unbelievable. (There were two steps in this logic: that show sentences should be seen as more objective than tell sentences, and that objective sentences should be seen as more believable.) The quality of clarity mentioned in Research Question 1 was measured with the scale clear-unclear. The quality of informativeness mentioned in Research Question 2 was measured with the scale informative-uninformative.
Table 1: “Show” and “tell” versions of each sentence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tell</th>
<th>Show</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The people were casually dressed.</td>
<td>The young men and women wore T-shirts and jeans and work pants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>That morning, the crew had finished putting steel spikes into the hole to serve as part of the future office building’s parking garage.</td>
<td>That morning, the crew had finished sinking rows of one-inch-thick, six-foot-high steel spikes -- called “rebars” -- into the hole to serve as the skeleton of the future office building’s parking garage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A man walking home one night saw a car turn around, pull into a side street and drive by an alley.</td>
<td>A drunk walking unsteadily home from a bar on Nov. 2 saw a red Dodge sedan snap a U-turn, whip into a side street and cruise slowly by an alley.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not long ago, I personally experienced virtual reality. High in the mountains north of Pyongyang, North Korea, lies a vast and heavily guarded colony.</td>
<td>Not long ago, I put on a spaceage helmet, slid my right hand into a silvery glove and took a trip into a computer-generated world. High in the mountains north of Pyongyang, North Korea, lies a vast colony ringed by electrified barbed wire and patrolled by guards carrying machine guns.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The local playground is in disrepair.</td>
<td>At the local playground, weeds poke through cracked concrete and climb over collapsed, rusted swing sets.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The view from the high mountaintop was spectacular.</td>
<td>In the view from the mountaintop, gray peaks rose in the distance, lush green terraces of rice paddies hugged the slopes, a thick tropical jungle covered the valleys, and far, far away, the blue-green Indian Ocean washed at the island shore.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The trees by the water are filled with birds frantically looking for insects.</td>
<td>The budding maples and birches overhanging the brook are alive with yellow-rumped warblers darting from twig to twig in a search for early insects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flying over the western grasslands, the ferruginous hawk has a wide wingspan and is a hefty predator.</td>
<td>Sweeping over western grasslands on wings more than four feet long, the ferruginous hawk -- named for its rust-colored feathers -- is a predator that weighs about four pounds.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suddenly I awoke, frightened.</td>
<td>Suddenly I awoke in a drenching sweat, my heart racing.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participants

Research participants were 80 undergraduate students in four journalism classes - three sections of Writing for the Mass Media, the first journalism class taken by most students, and one section of Copy Editing. The experimental materials were presented in the second or third week of the semester, before the topic of Show, Don’t Tell was discussed in class.
Analysis

Differences between the show and tell versions in the ratings of the sentences were examined by means of t-tests. (The sample size was actually 79 for most of the t-tests because one subject only responded on one of the six scales for each sentence.)

Results

Table 2: Mean semantic differential scores for sentences and results of t-tests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sentence</th>
<th>Interesting-dull</th>
<th>Clear-unclear</th>
<th>Informative-uninformative</th>
<th>Objective-subjective</th>
<th>Engaging-unengaging</th>
<th>Believable-unbelievable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Show 2.40 2.26</td>
<td>Tell 4.90 3.95*</td>
<td>Tell 3.68 4.26</td>
<td>Show 3.50 5.74**</td>
<td>Tell 2.15 2.46</td>
<td>Tell 5.80 6.31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Tell 3.74 4.43</td>
<td>Tell 4.13 4.70</td>
<td>Tell 5.23 6.10**</td>
<td>Tell 5.97 6.08</td>
<td>Tell 3.67 4.48*</td>
<td>Tell 6.33 6.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Tell 3.48 5.74**</td>
<td>Tell 4.05 4.95*</td>
<td>Tell 3.70 5.49**</td>
<td>Tell 5.08 3.92**</td>
<td>Tell 3.68 5.23**</td>
<td>Tell 5.35 4.85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Tell 4.33 5.85**</td>
<td>Tell 4.36 5.33**</td>
<td>Tell 3.45 4.43**</td>
<td>Tell 3.33 4.05</td>
<td>Tell 4.18 5.48**</td>
<td>Tell 4.85 4.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Tell 5.25 6.15**</td>
<td>Tell 5.10 5.79*</td>
<td>Tell 5.10 6.03**</td>
<td>Tell 4.85 5.49*</td>
<td>Tell 5.13 5.87**</td>
<td>Tell 5.75 5.66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Tell 2.41 5.73**</td>
<td>Tell 4.20 6.20**</td>
<td>Tell 3.72 5.48**</td>
<td>Tell 4.38 4.98</td>
<td>Tell 2.67 5.58**</td>
<td>Tell 5.36 6.33**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Tell 3.83 5.95**</td>
<td>Tell 4.98 5.28</td>
<td>Tell 3.25 5.51**</td>
<td>Tell 2.45 3.36*</td>
<td>Tell 3.78 5.77**</td>
<td>Tell 5.43 5.53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Tell 4.43 5.63**</td>
<td>Tell 5.82 5.00*</td>
<td>Tell 4.87 5.60**</td>
<td>Tell 4.21 5.08*</td>
<td>Tell 4.28 5.53**</td>
<td>Tell 5.67 5.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Tell 5.08 5.54</td>
<td>Tell 5.18 5.6</td>
<td>Tell 5.48 6.00*</td>
<td>Tell 4.98 5.15</td>
<td>Tell 4.75 5.49*</td>
<td>Tell 5.73 6.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Tell 4.62 5.93**</td>
<td>Tell 4.90 5.51</td>
<td>Tell 3.56 4.20</td>
<td>Tell 3.18 3.60</td>
<td>Tell 4.59 5.63**</td>
<td>Tell 5.51 5.65</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Means are significantly different by a t-test (p<.05). **Means are significantly different by a t-test (p<.01).

Results of the t-tests are presented for each of the ten sentences in Table 2.

Hypothesis 1, suggesting that show sentences will be seen by readers as more interesting than tell sentences, was generally supported. For seven of the 10 sentences, the show version was rated as significantly more interesting than the tell version. For nine of the 10 sentences, the show version was rated as significantly more engaging than the tell version.

Hypothesis 2, suggesting that show sentences will be seen as more believable than tell sentences, did not receive strong support. For four of the ten sentences, the show version was seen as significantly more objective than the tell version, but for one sentence the tell version was seen as significantly more objective than the show version. For only one of the ten sentences was the show version seen as more believable than the tell version.
The first research question asked whether a show sentence or a tell sentence would be seen as more clear. The answer was mixed, with the show version rated as significantly more clear for four sentences and the tell version rated as significantly more clear for two sentences. In the four sentences in which the show version was rated as more clear, this happened even though the show sentences were longer than the corresponding tell sentences.

The second research question asked whether a show or a tell sentence would be seen as more informative. The answer was more definite here, with the show version rated as significantly more informative for eight out of ten sentences.

Conclusions

Numerous authorities have suggested that writers should show, don’t tell if they want their writing to be more effective. This study basically supports the traditional wisdom of showing being preferable.

The experiment found strong evidence that, as many experts have implied, show sentences are seen as more interesting and engaging than tell sentences. The experiment also provided evidence that show sentences are seen as more informative than tell sentences.

While showing rather than telling apparently can make writing more interesting, engaging, and informative to readers, this study did not provide conclusive support for the idea that it always makes writing more believable and clear. The study found some evidence that show sentences are seen as more objective than tell sentences, but this did not carry over to make the show sentences more believable. While four of the show sentences were seen as more objective than their tell counterparts, one of the tell sentences was seen as significantly more objective than the show version. This was a sentence in which the show version used the word drunk. Perhaps this was not seen as an objective word choice.

In only one of ten tests was the show sentence more believable than the tell sentence. That one sentence is worth examining for some clues about sentence believability, however. The show version (“At the local playground, weeds poke through cracked concrete and climb over collapsed, rusted swing sets.”) was seen on the average as nearly one point more believable on the believable-unbelievable scale than the tell version (“The local playground is in disrepair.”). The first version allows the reader to draw his or her own conclusion about the state of the playground, while the second sentence - the tell version - draws a conclusion without providing evidence or imagery.
It is difficult to tell why this distinction did not hold up to produce statistically significant differences for the other nine sentences, but other variables simply may have played a stronger role. For example, two of the sentence pairs were in first person in both versions, which might tend to make both of them believable.

The experiment found mixed results for the variable of clarity, although twice as many show sentences (four) as tell sentences (two) were identified as clearer. The four show sentences that were rated as more clear than corresponding tell sentences were longer than the tell sentences. This is contrary to the likely prediction from readability research that shorter sentences are more understandable. The fact that these four sentences were seen as more clear than their shorter, more simply constructed tell versions provides more support for the basic power of showing.

In general, the study supports the recommendation to writers to show rather than tell, particularly if they want their writing to be more interesting, more engaging, more informative, more objective, and clearer. For these five dependent variables, the power of showing rather than telling seems strong. The research should be replicated with groups other than journalism students to see to what extent the results can be applied to more general groups of readers. The collection of 10 sentences chosen for the subjects to read varied in length, structure, and subject matter, and the show-versus-tell distinction seems to have overridden all of those factors to produce statistically significant differences in favor of the show sentences most of the time. The show sentences were rated as more interesting, engaging, and informative regardless of whether they were long or short, and regardless of whether they were about virtual reality, a local playground, or a view from a mountaintop. And the show sentences were rated higher than the tell sentences, not by contrast, but standing alone. In other words, because subjects saw only one version of each sentence pair, their ratings were not based on comparisons between the two versions, but on the merits of each sentence on its own.

This is not to say that there is not a place for tell writing, however. It was noted earlier that Marrazzo warns that too much showing can make the reader feel distanced. In fact, when gathering sentences to use in this experiment the authors found examples of sentences that seemed to be deliberately combining showing and telling. At times, that might be the best strategy.
Notes

11. *Ibid*.
17. *Ibid*.
30. Ibid., p. 37.
31. Hayakawa, op. cit.
32. Ibid, p. 46.