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The Writing Manual

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“All good books are alike in that they are truer than if they had really happened and after you are finished reading one you will feel that all that happened to you and afterwards it all belongs to you: the good and the bad, the ecstasy, the remorse and sorrow, the people and the places and how the weather was. If you can get so that you can give that to people, then you are a writer.”

— Ernest Hemingway

INTRODUCTION

Finding the space to be creative in your writing is critical to creating stories that will engage and delight your readers. The writing process should be enjoyable and satisfying and, at times, this is actually what happens when you find yourself in the smack bang in the middle of the 'flow'; words pour out, the characters spring to life and the story unfolds effortlessly.

However, it's not always like this. Sometimes, it can become difficult and arduous, with each word feeling like you each drawing blood. But you can find you way back to the 'flow' easier than you might think.

I have good news and bad news; there's always bad news.

First the bad news.

For years, teachers (whether at school or in creative writing workshops) have been teaching you the wrong stuff about the best way to write. You've been given a 'bum steer', as my grandfather used to say. You've been sold a dud.

You see, all that stuff about flowery prose, about having a narrator tell the story and about powerful words has crept into your brain and made your writing bad.

There, I've said it.

Let's not blame the teachers. Like all well-meaning busybodies, they know no better. They are just teaching you what they think is right.

Devastating I know but dry your tears. Here comes the good news.

In the following pages, I am going to teach you how to write like a pro. I'll show you the techniques that famous authors, such as Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald, developed and used to create some of the most memorable work in literature.

Here's the best news. It's easy.

Well, that's not true; it is simple but not always that easy, but I don't think you were ready to hear that just yet, so let's stick with easy.

You don't believe me?

OK, here's a simple technique that you can immediately apply to your writing. Without reading another chapter of this book, this one technique will make you a better writer. Later on, we will delve into the theory behind this technique, but, at this moment, I just want to show you that I'm the real deal.

It goes like this …

Take a scene from your book (any scene, I don't care) and then reimagine the scene as if the narrator is looking through a camera. Picture the scene in your mind's eye;

see the action and hear the words.

Now … rewrite the scene JUST describing what the narrator can see. If the narrator can't see it, it stays off the page.

That's important.

If the narrator can't see something, it can't go into the scene. That means, no thoughts and no internal dialogue, just plain old action and conversation.

You will be forced to describe the action as it happens.

Perhaps what is more important is what you are NOT forced to write.

If describing only what the camera can see, then two important elements are immediately removed from your writing: internal dialogue and backstory. If you need to pass on a vital nugget of information about the main character's past, then the only option you have is to do it via dialogue. If you want to tell the reader that the main character is sad, you must SHOW the reader how the character is sad. That means describing the character's tears, so more tears and the removal of the classic "she was sad" line.

And that's it.

If you are able to apply this Camera Technique to your work, you will be a better author.

Promise. Just try it.

The Camera Technique is the foundation of the way you will be taught to write by this book, a method of writing that will stimulate emotion in your readers and help produce memorable books.

The remainder of this book is a description of how and why this technique works so well. Yet it is not dry theory; instead, you will be given detailed and pragmatic examples of how you can apply the theory to your writing.

ENGAGING YOUR READER

We discovered in the previous chapters that the biggest hurdle facing authors is creating books that readers want to read. We also discovered that the main reason readers stop reading is that they find books boring. Then we discovered that, if we write books that stimulate a reader's emotions, the reader will keep reading. In this chapter, we turn our attention to the simple technique we are going to use to keep readers enthralled in your book.

The first step is to delve a little more deeply into what a reader means when saying a book is boring. As we have seen, the answer is pretty simple.

A boring book is one that a reader fails to find interesting. Let's put that differently, a boring book is one in which the reader fails to engage.

The idea of engagement is essential, so I want to reinforce its meaning in this context.

Engagement is when a reader is emotionally invested in a book. Remember that feeling when you can't wait to get back to a novel you are reading? Yeah? Well, that's engagement. What about the feeling of shock when a character you love is killed off? We are all looking at you R.R. Well, you've guessed it; that's also engagement.

Sorry, we are on the verge of jargon here, so let's delve a little deeper before it all gets out of hand.

A reader that is engaged in your book is active.

A reader that is not engaged in your book (thinks it boring) is passive.

The best way to explain the concept of active reading is with an example.

Let's say you are writing a novel about a petty criminal called John. As the main character of your book, John will have a detailed backstory. Let's say that one of the key elements of this backstory is that John is scared of dogs. His fear of dogs will play an important part in the climax of the story and is, therefore, an important plot point. The reader needs to know about John's dog fear. The question is, how do you show the reader that John is scared of dogs?

You have two choices.

One will leave the reader actively engaged; the other will produce a passive, bored reader.

The first option (the easiest) is to dump the backstory via the narrator. This is the process of using the narrator to TELL the reader about the backstory.

You could write this into the first chapter of your book:

John had always been scared of dogs. Just the sound of a distant bark would put him in a cold sweat. His mother had always insisted this fear had sprung from an incident when he was just a baby. Apparently, a large black Labrador had jumped into John's stroller, nipping his hand while snatching a melting ice cream. John wasn't one for cheap psychology. He just knew he hated dogs.

Seems OK, right?

As seen above, the narrator is TELLING the reader about John's fear of dogs. You have now ticked the box called "tell reader John is scared of dogs", and you are free to write the more exciting scenes.

The problem is that this approach leaves the reader in a passive stance, simply sitting back, as the narrator spoon-feeds the key elements of the plot. The reader is not required to do any work and is just given the information. The reader doesn't have to piece together any clues or interpret any actions or even read between the lines to see what a section of dialogue is really about. It is all there, no confusion.

Not convinced?

Well, it may seem fine for this one example but imagine a whole book of this backstory dumping. Each time the author needs to TELL the reader about an important plot point, it is just dumped into the narrative, ticking off that box. This way each plot point and backstory element is spoon-fed to the reader, who sits back and lets it happen.

It quickly becomes, well … boring.

Yawn.

If we can't dump the backstory, what's the other option?

The second choice is to actively engage the reader. This requires more work, more skill, more thought, but the rewards are astounding. With this approach, the author doesn't TELL the reader that John is scared of dogs; instead, the author SHOWS the reader by leaving clues. You must force the reader to work for the plot, sifting the story to find the plot elements that are important.

Let's go back to our mate John. If you remember, John's fear of dogs is a major plot point, and we need to let the reader know. At first, there's no need to write a new scene. Just begin by taking a scene from the start of the book and adding in a description of a passing dog. Nothing spectacular, just a dog on the street. Blink and you'll miss it. John, of course, sees the dog and reacts. You don't write in any new dialogue, just a few lines of description where John sees the animal and crosses the street to avoid the dog. It is essential that the narrator describes the action but offers no explanation. The narrator must not TELL the reader why John is acting in the way described. The narrator must just SHOW the reader John's actions without explanation.

Now let's jump forward.

Imagine there's a scene, at a key point in the book, in which John, having just committed a crime, is running from the police. John knows a shortcut down an alley. He turns into the alley and sees a dog. John stops in his tracks, turns around and chooses to take a different route. He is nearly caught by the police in the process.

Again, this is action only. The narrator must not TELL the reader why John is acting this way, just a description of his actions. The writer SHOWS the reader with no explanation. Nothing is said about the dog, beyond a description of John's actions. John sees the dog and reacts. It is up to the reader to draw his or her conclusions. The writer is leaving a space between the actions of the character and the explanation from the narrator. The reader will 'lean into' this space and provide meaning.

Finally, you write a new scene.

In this, John and his partner in crime are in a car. John sees a dog in the nearby park. He looks at the dog and shakes his head, muttering under his breath. His partner asks, 'What is it with you and dogs?' And you are off … Now you can write a conversation (it must be via dialogue), in which John talks about his hatred of dogs. Perhaps he relates the ice-cream-in-the-stroller story; it is up to you. You already have the backstory in your head (as the author). How much of this you give to the reader is your choice.

What is essential is that the reader learns of John's fear via conversation, NOT via the narrator.

What you are doing here is writing a scene in which you can present dialogue that passes the backstory in a convincing manner. John's friend has seen John's reaction to dogs; it would only be natural for it to pop into conversation. This dialogue exchange then becomes a vehicle for you to present backstory.

I would like to go one step further.

It would be perfectly acceptable for you, the author, to never explain John's fear of dogs to the reader. You could remove the conversation completely and just have John reacting to dogs. The important aspect is that you, the author, understand John's fear and how he will react in any given situation.

Have you ever seen the Indiana Jones series of films? In these, Indy often encounters snakes, which he hates.

In Raiders of the Lost Ark there is this exchange:

Indiana: There's a big snake in the plane, Jock!

Jock: Oh, that's just my pet snake, Reggie.

Indiana: I hate snakes, Jock! I hate 'em!

Jock: Come on! Show a little backbone, will ya!

The viewer is never given a reason for Indy's fear of snakes. Does the story's creator, George Lucas, know the reason? Perhaps. Does it matter that the viewer is never told? Absolutely not.

Indy's fear is just a tool to humanize the character and to help the viewer engage. As part of Indy's backstory, it helps the screenwriter, the creator, and even the actor, to predict how Indy will react in a situation that involves snakes.

For all of this SHOWING to work there's one important rule. The only thing you must NOT do is have the narrator explain the backstory via narrative summary.

Wow, that's an important little statement.

For all of this to work, you are relying on one trick of the reader's brain.

In real day-to-day life, we see people acting and hear people speaking, but we have no explanation for their reasons or motivations. Our brain has become very good at seeing meaning in words and actions. At the most basic level, if a man looks angry, is carrying a big stick, running toward us, shouting, "Die", then our brain must work out what is going on pretty fast.

This means that, whenever your brain sees an event, or hears words of conversation, it will automatically try to work out the meaning behind those words and actions. This is where the magic happens. It is this action of the brain that you, as an author, are trying to harness.

If you can write events in which people act convincingly but then don't explain why, your reader's brain will do the rest and add in a meaning. The same goes for conversation. Your reader's brain will naturally look for meaning between the lines.

If you write truthfully (as in, true to the nature of people), your reader's brain will see the deeper meaning. That's why, when John runs from the dog, your reader's brain is trying to work out why.

Another way to think of this is that you are trying to create a distance between the reader and the character, we've already talked about this 'narrative space'.

By not explaining why John is scared of the dog, the reader is forced to fill in the blanks.

Perhaps the reader is also scared of dogs and overlays his fear. Even if the reader is not scared of dogs, we are all scared of something. Your brain recognizes fear when it sees it. There is something in all our lives that will, metaphorically, make us cross the street. After all, fear is the deepest of human emotions.

American psychologist and professor of psychology, Paul Ekman, has categorized

six emotions that he classes at ‘primary emotions’, these are:

- Anger
- Disgust
- Fear
- Happiness
- Sadness
- Surprise

It is these emotions that you, as a writer are trying to stimulate in the mind of the reader. These are universal emotions that every human will recognize at a base level.

So … here’s the next level.

By forcing the reader to recognize fear (or any of the primary emotions) and to look for that emotion in the reader’s memory banks, the author is triggering a deeper truth than could ever be expressed in words. The reader sees John’s fear and, at some level, experiences that fear.

The key point here is that, by altering the way you write, by moving away from narrative summary and toward words and actions, you are forcing the reader from a passive stance into an active stance. When you write in a way that creates a narrative space between the reader and the characters, the reader will lean in and engage with your book.

In the most simplistic terms:

- Narrative summary (dumping backstory) = TELL.
- Passing backstory via dialogue and actions = SHOW.

A word of warning here …

You are going to learn to use ‘show, don’t tell’ in a way that moves far beyond anything taught in a creative writing class. Writing in this manner is more than a simple technique; it is a writing methodology. In fact, ‘show, don’t tell’ will become your mantra. The application of this one simple phrase is the key to unlocking your novel and creating active prose that sucks the reader into your story. You will find that by simply repeatedly asking, “Am I SHOWING or TELLING?” you will lift your novel to the highest possible level.

The trick is now to forget this theory and to learn the simple techniques that will allow you to build the Show, Don’t Tell Methodology into the very fabric of your writing. It’s this that we will be addressing in the coming chapters.

To apply the Show, Don’t Tell Methodology to a novel you will need to focus on four key aspects:

1. Characterization.
2. Dialogue.
3. Description.
4. Narrative Summary.

In the following chapters, we will look at each of these four key aspects in turn. Characterization will see you learning how to use backstory to determine how characters will react in any given situation. Dialogue will show you how to write conversation that creates a narrative space between the reader and your characters. Description will demonstrate the best way to describe events, and narrative summary will give you guidelines as to what you can and can't have the narrator saying to the reader.

However, before we delve into the four concepts, let's look a little closer at the idea of primary emotions.

PRIMARY EMOTIONS

In the previous chapter, we examined how writing truthfully and stimulating primary emotions will help to engage in your reader. In this chapter, we will look a little deeper at the idea of emotions.

It is interesting to discover that the idea of emotions only really started to become popular in the 1830s (around the same time as the novel started to gain mass popularity) before this people tend to experience things such as "passions" or "moral sentiments", rather than emotions. You can see from the painting below of sixteen faces expressing human “passions” (J. Pass, in 1821), people recognized that some type of universal reaction existed, it was just that it had not been given a name.

Since the 1830s, the study of emotions has been constant and the results are complex and interesting, however, as a writer, there is one very important element of emotions of which you should be familiar and that is all emotions produce an action.

That’s the one thing you need to know. If you experience an emotion, then your body will react.

In the 1970s, professor Klass Scherer developed what came to be called, Scherer's Component Process Model (CPM) of emotion, developed in the 1970s, sets out five ways in which a person may react to an emotion:

- Cognitive appraisal: provides an evaluation of events and objects.
- Bodily symptoms: the physiological component of emotional experience.
- Action tendencies: a motivational component for the preparation and direction of motor responses.
- Expression: facial and vocal expression almost always accompanies an emotional state to communicate reaction and intention of actions.
- Feelings: the subjective experience of emotional state once it has occurred.

In other words, when experiencing an emotion a person will act in a semi-predictable

manner. Yes, each person will have their own set of reactions to any emotion, but on the whole, these reactions will be roughly similar. However, most importantly, these actions are recognized by other humans as reactions to an emotion.

If we see a person acting in a certain manner, we are hardwired to understand what emotion they are experiencing. If we see someone crying, we suspect they are sad.

And this is the key to truth writing.

If you can describe characters that are acting in a way that is a truthful reflection of the emotion, the reader will not only recognize that emotion but they will also begin to experience this emotion to some extent. Humans are empathic creatures by nature and we are affected by the emotions we see being experienced.

It makes sense that we have developed the ability to see and mimic the emotions of the people close by. It is easy to see how the ability of ancient man to recognize that another person was fearful after seeing the sabre tooth tiger might save a life.

This brings us to Paul Ekman, who we met in the previous chapter. His research involved him studying the facial expressions of people and it showed that six distinct emotions were experienced and expressed across all cultures.

He identified the following emotions:

- Anger
- Disgust
- Fear
- Happiness
- Sadness
- Surprise

These emotions are now regarded as the six Primary Emotions.

This means that your job, as a writer, is to create characters that truthfully express these six emotions. Remember, every emotion brings with it a set of actions. If you can describe these actions, then the reader will recognize the emotion.

It is impossible to list every emotion and action but can see that a character that moves aggressively towards someone might be angry, or that a character who holds their nose might be expressing disgust, or a character that runs away might be fearful, or one that laughs may be happy, or one that cries may be sad or one that covers their mouth with their hands might be surprised. These are actions that we link with emotions.

As a writer, you must become a student of human behavior, you must watch and learn as people experience emotions. You must become an expert in finding those behaviors that reflect true emotion.

But, of course, it's not that simple.

Professor Robert Plutchik agreed with Ekman's assessment of the six primary emotions but he took the idea onto the next step. He did two important things. The first was to group emotions into positive and negative pairs. For example, he argued that happiness was positive and its negative twin was sadness. The second was that Plutchik recognized that Ekman's work had been based mostly on facial expressions and that when other actions were taken into account, there were more than the initial six emotions, though these new emotions tended to be 'shades' of the six primary emotions.

Luckily for us, Plutchik grouped all of his research into a handy, easy to understand the chart, which he called the 'emotion wheel'.

This wheel shows us that emotions, such as fear (green), has shades of expression. A person can show apprehension, before progressing to fear and, finally, terror. The same is true for anger (red) with a person progressing from annoyance, through anger

to rage.

This, of course, presents you, the writer, with a bigger problem. If you are going to write truthful characters then you will need to develop the ability to describe characters that express a range of emotions, with shades of intensity.

At this point, I would have liked to say that this was easy and that there was a table listing all of the possible actions for each emotion, but this would be a lie. The action any person makes for any one of the shades of emotion is slightly different. They depend on so many factors, that creating that list would be impossible. The reality is that creating characters that act truthfully is a lifelong journey.

This is what Hemingway meant when he said:

“All you have to do is write one true sentence. Write the truest sentence that you know.”

However, there is some good news. If you start to get this right, and you don’t even need to be 100% right, then you will capture your reader within the first few pages of your book. Once you have them, you will keep them forever.

In the next chapter, we return to the first of the four key concepts of creating books your reader will love and examine the role of characterization.

CHARACTERIZATION

The aim of this section is to show how you can use your knowledge of a character's backstory to dictate the way your characters will act in any given situation. The more complex your characters' backstory, the more realistic your characters and the more likely your readers are to fully engage with your novel.

The fundamental principle behind the Show, Don't Tell Methodology is that a story is told via actions and dialogue. The role of the narrator is to provide description, not explanation. The ultimate aim is for the story to happen inside a reader's mind, not on the page of the book. Only by lifting the story off the page and into the reader's mind will the reader remain engaged and interested.

Yet there is a deeper principle at work.

Understand that emotionally truthful characters are defined by a reader's interpretation of the characters' words and actions, NOT by a narrator's guidance.

This is a wordy sentence, but we've already touched on this concept.

Let me explain again …

When you write characters, who act and speak in a way that is true to real emotion (anger, disgust, fear, happiness, sadness or surprise), it is the meaning the reader gives to these words and actions that matter, not what the narrator TELLS the reader to think and feel.

Understand that any story is capable of stirring deep, universal emotions within the reader. In other words, it is the author's job to SHOW the reader what the characters are doing via actions and dialogue.

The writer must not TELL the reader the reasons behind the words and actions via narrative summary. The writer must not tell the reader the emotion the character is experiencing, they must SHOW this by the character's action.

How does this principle apply to characters?

Again, we are faced with a situation in which complex theory is actually applied via simple writing techniques. To discover this technique, we must first delve a little deeper into characters.

All major characters within a novel will consist of three essential components:

1. Internal dialogue.
2. External dialogue.
3. Actions.

Internal dialogue is the soundtrack within a character's mind. This is the character's unique combination of beliefs, experience, and upbringing. This is the moral compass (or lack thereof) that will influence the way the character interacts with the physical world.

External dialogue is the words that come out of a character's mouth.

Actions are just that, actions. This is the way in which a character will react to an event.

The magic comes when we bring all three elements together. It is the difference between a character's internal dialogue, their external dialogue and their actions which breathes life into your story.

In short, real people often say one thing and do another.

INTERNAL VOICE

All characters (and real people for that matter) have a set of unspoken beliefs, which are a combination of all their life experiences. This is the voice inside their head that not only provides a constant dialogue but will also influence a character's reaction in any given situation. These thoughts are unconscious.

For example …

Perhaps your main character was brought up in a family environment that teaches that Chinese people are dishonest and cannot be trusted. As your character grows up, he may have intellectually understood that this belief is wrong, but it is ingrained and lies dormant nonetheless. This latent racist attitude makes up part of the character's internal voice. He may be consciously aware that this view is racist. Yet he may not even consider himself to be a racist. In everyday life, he probably says and does things that demonstrate to the world that he is not, in fact, racist. However, in any given situation involving interaction with a Chinese person, the character will be influenced, subconsciously, by his internal voice. The character would, probably, not say, "I distrust Chinese people". However, he would interact in a way, perhaps subtly (or not so subtly), different from a character who did not hold the same beliefs.

You can see here how the backstory for this character can have him saying and believing he is not racist, but, when confronted by a situation with Chinese people, he could act in a way that shows himself to be racist.

He says one thing and does another.

All of the characters in your book need a well-defined internal voice. You must map out the key influences on your characters. Therefore, the starting point to creating an internal voice for your characters is to create each character's backstory.

The backstory is the character's life history. It is a summary of all the key events and modes of thought, which influence the character in a major way. In its simplest form, this is a list of beliefs the character holds, and, perhaps, the events that created these beliefs.

Only by understanding a character's background can an author then begin to develop the character's internal voice. The more the writer understands a character's complex background, the more realistically can the writer invent the character's personality.

This process can be very daunting, but it is important to understand that characters don't need to appear fully formed in your mind.

Many experienced writers will start the writing process by jotting down a few notes about a character and the major influences in that character's life. The writer will decide on the character's main views on the world and build a broad picture of the character. Some writers like to find pictures and images to represent the character. Some think of real people.

The end goal is always the same, to get inside the head of the character. As the story develops, writers will elaborate and expand on this picture. They will add in smaller details, allowing the character to grow and breathe.

This character profile is an essential part of the writing process, but here's the big secret: it's a secret.

The character profile is created for your eyes only. It is NOT part of the novel.

Once you have spent time and effort creating a character profile, you will face temptation to divulge this to your reader. It must be overcome. Under no circumstances can you share the character profile with your reader.

You will feel the temptation to TELL the reader about the character's internal thought process and backstory. You will want to explain to the reader why a character is acting in a certain way.

Let's face it. You'll want to show off and TELL the reader why your writing is so clever.

If you do, YOU LOSE.

You must resist.

At no point should the internal voice of your character spill onto the page. The internal voice is for you and your character. It is a secret that must not be shared.

(It might be worth noting here that internal voice and internal dialogue are not the same thing. It is OK to pass character thought to the reader via the narrator, but more on this in the dialogue chapter.)

You, the writer, must understand the reasoning behind every word and action of your characters, but you must never explain this reasoning to the reader.

The ultimate goal is to create a space between the character and the reader. You want your characters to speak and act in a way that is both truthful and logical but never explained by the narrator. It is in this space that the reader will fill in his or her understanding of the character. The reader will, instinctively, search to understand the character. Remember what was said in the opening sections. Everyone's brain is trained to give meaning to words and actions; it just can't resist.

This forces the reader to engage, to become part of the story. As the reader's understanding of your characters grows, via their words and actions, the reader will start to gain a deeper meaning.

It is this deeper, emotional truth that will lift your novel to the next level.

The internal voice is the author's secret weapon. It is the tool that will bring your characters to life.

It's your Dr. Frankenstein's bolt of lightning.

Yet the space you create between actions and meaning is dark and fragile. By exposing this internal voice to the light of the narrative, the magic is broken. As soon as a reader is TOLD how a character acts, the reader is pushed onto the back foot. The reader no longer needs to work it out. The reader no longer needs to fill in the gaps. The reader's brain can shut down.

Each time you TELL the reader a character is happy or sad, rather than SHOW via actions, the reader disengages a little more.

Each time you TELL the reader a nugget of the backstory via the narrator, not in dialogue, the reader is pushed away.

Each time you give in to temptation and explain, the reader starts to turn off.

If a narrator is explaining the internal voice, then the reader is instantly passive. The reader is left in a position where they are no longer needed to lean into the story. They can sit back and let the story come to him. This reduces the space between the character and the reader, and no room is left for the reader's mind to create its magic.

EXTERNAL VOICE

We've seen that internal voice is a character's thought pattern; the internal beliefs that drive a character's words and actions. External voice is less complex and is simply the words a character speaks.

However, it is not that simple.

The Show, Don't Tell Methodology is a process in which a writer removes the story from narrative summary and, instead, tells the story via words and actions.

It is worth a mention that I am not suggesting that writers stop using narrative sum-

mary. I am not even suggesting that writers stop putting characters' thoughts in the narrative summary (more on that later). All I am saying is that an author must use the narrative summary with care and consideration.

Since no backstory can be dumped in the narrative summary, dialogue is suddenly very important. After all, it is the only way in which you can pass the plot and backstory to the reader.

External voice, or dialogue, now becomes an author's most important tool.

So … how do you know what a character will say in any given situation?

To understand the best way to write dialogue, you must start to see conversation in a new light. You must see dialogue as an exchange between characters with a clearly defined purpose. However, it remains important that dialogue has a realistic feel. You need to be writing conversations that could have actually happened.

In essence, dialogue is a string of interactions.

One character says something; another character reacts … and so on.

"Hello," John said. [Action]

"Hi," Bill said. [Reaction]

Sometimes you will have a character choose to not react verbally (or they may react physically). This is all part of the action-reaction sequence.

"Hello," John said. [Action]

Bill stared at John. [Reaction]

Or …

"Hello," John said. [Action]

Bill smiled and waved. [Reaction]

Once you have set up your characters in an action-reaction sequence, your next job is to decide what they will say.

There are actually three types of dialogue:

1. Dialogue that makes sense for the scene.
2. Dialogue that moves the plot forward.
3. Dialogue that fills in backstory.

Let's consider these in order...

The first is what makes sense for the scene. This is the natural speech pattern of the character in reaction to the events in the current scene. For example, if a character is introduced to a person they have never met, and the person says, "Hello", then your character will reply with an appropriate comment, probably "Hello". There is also dialogue that is reacting to an event in the scene. For example, if the scene sees the main

character buying a present for his wife, his wife would react when she is given the present.

The second type of dialogue is what needs to be said for the plot. Since you are unable to move the plot forward via narrative summary, you must use events and conversation to tell your story. This means that, at times, you will need certain characters to say things to move the plot forward. For example, let's say you need to establish that your main character, let's call him John, has a sister. This is an important plot point. Now that you can just have the narrator TELL the reader that John has a sister. You will need to add this in dialogue.

The scene could go something like this:

John stood in the parking lot of the pub. It was dark outside, and the sky promised rain. A taxi pulled into the lot and made a circuit, before coming to a stop in front of John. The driver let down the window, his dark skin and black hair visible in the dashboard lights.

"You order a taxi?" His voice was tinged with an Oriental accent.

"No," John said.

The driver shrugged and fumbled with his radio, speaking into it in a language John didn't understand. A voice on the other end responded, too muffled for John to hear. The driver leaned over.

"You sure, mate?"

"Yeah," John said.

"Ah …" the driver said. "Do you want a lift anyway?"

"Thanks. I am waiting for my sister."

"OK," the taxi driver said and pulled out of the parking lot.

The key here is that the plot point (John has a sister) has been passed to the reader in a realistic manner. This is a conversation that could have actually happened. The result is that the reader is SHOWN that John has a sister.

The final type of dialogue is what needs to be said for the backstory.

Since we are unable to pass backstory via the narrative, dialogue is the only outlet. We have seen that a character's backstory is not just events important to the plot (e.g. John went to university), but also ideals and beliefs that may influence the way a character speaks (e.g. John is scared of dogs). Both of these elements will have an impact on the dialogue between your characters. However, since dialogue needs to be realistic, this is not always that easy.

If you just have a character start talking about something that does not fit naturally

in a scene, then the reader will smell a rat. They will see what you are doing, and the magic is broken. One of the challenges that you face, as an writer, is to create credible scenes to pass backstory to the reader via dialogue.

This is, actually, a more common problem than you think.

One reason that many detective stories feature a sidekick is to allow the main character to discuss the case without any additional content. Think about it. The writer needs to pass a vital bit of backstory. What better way than to have the sidekick tell the main character about an anomaly picked up in an autopsy. That's why Holmes had Watson.

The pragmatic reality is that you will find yourself writing scenes with the sole purpose of passing backstory. Old friends from the past will show up just so you have a chance to share dialogue about the main character's tough childhood and alcoholic mother, dinner party conversations will pop up so you can talk about a piece of new government legislation relevant to the plot, or cars will break down just so a character can talk about the mechanical skills he learned in the army.

Imagine you needed to let the reader know that your main character had attended university. You would not drop this into the narration, instead, you would include the fact in the dialogue of a scene. However, this is not easy. Think about your own life. How many situations can you think of where you would talk about your education? I am guessing not that many. This probably means that you will need to write a scene just to pass along this backstory. Perhaps the character meets an old university friend for coffee. This would then give you the perfect excuse to write conversation with the freedom to say just about anything you wished about the university days, but via dialogue.

Having mastered the concept of using dialogue to not only build on the plot but also to pass along backstory via dialogue, there's one additional concept to consider, and that is the influence of the internal voice.

As we have established, the internal voice comprises the beliefs and thought processes of each of your characters. It is the subconscious thinking that influences all the nuances of your characters' lives. It will also dictate how they speak and how they react to certain situations.

For example, a character scared of dogs, who is asked to take a friend's dog for a walk, will react differently to this request than a character who loves dogs.

When writing any dialogue, be it to fit in a scene, move forward the plot or pass along backstory, you must always consider the role the character's internal voice will play on the words that the character actually says.

A character's internal voice will influence how he or she reacts, plus the types of words and phrases he or she will use.

In the example we gave above, when discussing internal voice, we suggested the main character's internal voice was telling him to distrust Chinese people. We have suggested that this may be a subtle influence, one of which the character is unaware. Remember, we are not saying the character (John) is an out-and-out racist, but he holds a skewed worldview.

Let's go back to the taxi scene and rewrite it with this internal latent racism in mind. It might go something like this …

John stood in the parking lot of the pub. It was dark outside, and the sky promised rain. A taxi pulled into the lot and made a circuit, before coming to a stop in front of John. The driver let down the window, his dark skin and black hair visible in the dashboard lights.

"You order a taxi?" His voice was tinged with an Oriental accent.

"No," John said, taking a small step back from the car.

The driver shrugged and fumbled with his radio, speaking into it in a language John didn't understand. A voice on the other end responded, too muffled for John to hear. The driver leaned over.

"You sure, mate?"

"Yeah," John said. "I am sure."

"Ah …" the driver said. "Do you want a lift anyway?"

"Aren't you supposed to only pick up planned fares?" There was a pause. "It doesn't matter. I am waiting for my sister. She'll be here any moment."

"OK," the taxi driver said and pulled out of the parking lot.

John watched the cab leave, making a mental note of the license plate number.

Here we have added a physical action with him moving back from the cab. We have also added a verbal reaction, with him questioning the driver's right to pick up a passenger. Finally, we have John noting the license plate number. These small changes play no part in the overall plot. However, what they do is add texture and insight into John's character.

In this situation, the reader will pick up on the subtle behaviors of the character. The reader's brain will instinctively try to work out why the character is acting the way he is, to build the reader's own story about the character.

The words and actions are triggers for the reader. They create a space between the reader and the character and force the reader to dive into that space, as the reader

contemplates why the character would react in that way. The character may say he's not a racist, and may even believe this to be true, but his words and actions in this scene suggest otherwise. This paradox excites the reader.

The reader is pulled into the story and forced to engage. The reader is becoming an active participant, as they try to understand the character and the way he reacts.

ACTIONS

As we have seen, the Show, Don't Tell Methodology means that you are unable to rely on narrative summary to tell your story. Instead, you must look for other, more engaging, ways to connect with the reader. In the last section, we saw that dialogue was one piece of this jigsaw puzzle. In this section, we turn our attention to how you can use actions to help build engagement.

The granular structure of any novel is simple: events occur and characters react to the events. However, how a character reacts to any given event can be as much a clue to their backstory as any dialogue.

The way in which a character acts is based on three things:

1. Actions that make sense for the scene.
2. Actions that move the plot forward.
3. Actions that fill in backstory.

This is the same pattern as the approach we took with dialogue.

Some events will demand a common sense response and make sense for the scene. For example, the phone rings - your character answers the phone. Other events will be part of the plot. For example, the killer starts to run away - your main character chases him. However, sometimes, the reaction will be based on the internal voice. For example, a dog barks - the character jumps.

Let me give you a more detailed example …

If we cycle back to John, we are now starting to build a profile for the character. We know he is afraid of dogs and why. We also know he was brought up to mistrust Chinese people, and this is showing in the way he speaks and acts. We saw this in a past example when John's internal voice influenced the way he reacted to the taxi driver. In this upcoming example, we will mess with John a bit more by introducing a dog.

Here's the basic scene, with no internal influence:

John walks along the street. It is late afternoon, and, with most people at work and

kids at school, the suburban landscape is deserted. John shivers in the cold biting wind, pulling up the zipper of his coat all the way to his chin. Ahead of John, perhaps about twenty paces, a mangy-looking large black dog steps from between two parked cars. John walks on, looking left and right for its possible owner. As the dog passes, they exchange a brief look. John walks in one direction, the dog in the other.

The event is a dog appearing between two parked cars. John's reaction is, well, minimal.

Now, let's rewrite the scene but with John's internal voice in play. We know John is scared of dogs, and, therefore, his reaction will be different.

John walks along the street. It was late afternoon, and, with most people at work and kids at school, the suburban landscape is deserted. John shivers in the cold, biting wind, pulling up the zipper of his coat all the way to his chin. Ahead of John, perhaps about twenty paces, a mangy-looking large black dog stepps from between two parked cars. John stops. He takes a small step backwards, before looking up and down the street. There is no traffic. The dog pads in John's direction. John strides across the road, leaving the dog to pace its own way in the other direction, on the opposite side of the street.

In this example, we are SHOWING the reader that John is scared of dogs. There's no narrative mention (or explanation) of this fear; instead, it is reflected in John's reaction.

John is acting like someone who is scared of dogs may react.

In fact, this is not completely correct. We saw in the chapter about emotion that though there are six primary emotions, each of these emotions have varied levels of reaction. I think it would be fair to say that though John is expressing fear, a better description would be apprehension; the lowest level of fear.

The reader's brain, which is programmed to see meaning in actions, will try to work out why John has acted this way. The reader's brain will give John's actions a meaning. However, at this point, the reader doesn't have enough information to complete the picture. The reader will, however, become engaged as he leans into John's character, seeing his fear/apprehension.

The important aspect of this approach is that John's reaction leaves the reader with a small clue about John's past. The reader now knows that John has reacted to the presence of a dog. This may be part of a bigger jigsaw puzzle that is left for the reader to piece together, it may be a critical plot point or may simply be the writer adding texture to the story. It doesn't matter. John is now a more realistic character.

Once again, by not explaining via the narrator, we are creating a distance between

the reader and the characters. The reader can see how John is reacting and is forced to lean into the story. The reader must engage with John and start to build his or her own explanations.

Think of it like this, the reader sees John reacting to the dog. The action of crossing the road to avoid the dog is the action of someone who fears dogs. Therefore, John is afraid of dogs.

This is engagement and, if done consistently, will stop your reader from becoming bored.

However, this presents a question - must every splash of action contain influence from the internal voice?

The answer is well, … yes, well, … kind of.

Most actions within a scene will be straightforward. When deciding on how a character reacts to an event, the first thing to do is decide what the commonsense reaction would be. Having decided that, you need to work out if the reaction needs to differ, in order to fulfill the plot. Finally, having decided what your character should do, you now need to decide if the action is influenced, in any way, by the character's internal voice.

Therefore, the question to ask yourself, when writing any scene, is - how would the character react?

The answer to this question will often take your character on a wonderful journey. You will find your characters doing things that are unexpected and exciting. They will surprise you and the reader. Yet, most importantly, when writing with honesty, your characters will come alive, not just on the pages of your book but in the minds of your readers.

USING ALL THREE

We've now looked at the role of internal voice, dialogue and actions in helping your reader to engage with your story. Let's go back to our mate John and demonstrate how all three principles can be used in a short scene.

The fundamental concept of the Show, Don't Tell Methodology is that a writer must keep backstory and plot out of the narration, since including backstory in narration leaves the reader on the back foot and quickly results in them becoming bored. Showing, not telling solves this problem by forcing the reader to lean into the book and work for the plot. This produces interest, keeps the reader active and sucks them into the story.

By not using narration to pass along backstory, the writer is forced to look to other methods to tell the story. This is where characterization comes into play.

As discussed, a writer has three aspects to any character:

1. Their internal voice.
2. Their external voice.
3. Their actions.

The internal voice is the writer's secret weapon and is the way the character thinks about the world. The external voice is the character's conversation and can be used to pass along backstory and plot. Finally, the way a character reacts to any given situation provides a subtle, though powerful, method to provide readers with clues about the character's backstory.

The combined use of internal voice, external voice and actions is often called characterization.

There is one final aspect of characterization we have yet to address.

You will often hear readers talking about three-dimensional characters. This is one of those terms that has no real, definable meaning. Readers (and reviewers) who talk about three-dimensional characters will often mean characters who are realistic or true to life.

The problem you face is that you are telling a story, not writing a documentary. By their very nature, characters in a novel are not real people. The goal of a novel is to stimulate emotion in readers and to tap into some deeper truth. This is done with characters who mimic the real world in a way that tricks the reader's brain into believing these characters are real.

Luckily you can use the characterization methodology set out in this book to create realistic characters.

How often have you heard a person say one thing, but then act in a completely different way?

Or, how often have you heard a person say something, believe it fully, then act in a contradictory way?

Or, how often have you said one thing, believed it to be true, then found yourself acting in a way that contradicts your earlier statement?

The simple answer is that people often say and act in different ways. That's what makes people, people.

This is also what makes your character three-dimensional. It means that, if you are going to create realistic characters, they need to think, speak and act in ways that are, at times, contradictory.

The good news is that you already have the tools in place to do this with little addi-

tional effort. You are going to use your character's backstory to create situations in which your character reacts in an unexpected, though logical (if only to you) manner.

Let's go back to John for an example:

John walked into the cramped three-bedroom house, carrying a large cardboard box with a massive pink ribbon tied into a bow on top. He found his sister leaning on the door frame of the open back door, the final drags of a cigarette in her hand. When she saw John, she flicked the cigarette butt into the garden and then turned to him, her face beaming with a smile.

"John, is that for me?" she said, nodding at the box.

John smiled back, pushing the box onto the kitchen table, its awkward weight evident.

"I don't see any other birthday girl about, do you?" John looked around in an exaggerated motion, before leaning in and kissing his sister on the cheek. "You'd better open it quick. It's not the kind of present that likes to be kept waiting."

She danced from foot to foot, as she tugged at the pink ribbon. As soon as the ribbon fell away, the box lid forced its own way open with an explosion of black fur, ears, eyes and nose. John's sister scooped up the dog.

"A puppy. I love him."

John's bought his sister a dog. Really? What's going on? We know John hates dogs, so this makes no sense. John's acting irrationally.

Or is he?

Well, it is all a matter of perspective.

Remember, this is an example of characterization. The point here is that people do strange things. They often think/say one thing and do another. People do things that make no sense; it is what makes people, people. It is what will make your characters interesting and three-dimensional.

It is OK, in fact, desirable, that your characters do things that make no sense to the reader. That's the point. Though characters do things that make no sense to the reader, they should make perfect sense to the writer. A character should surprise a reader, but they must never surprise the writer.

Here's a little secret about John and his sister, which you, the reader, don't know yet (and may never know), because I, the writer, haven't told you.

When they were younger, John's sister had always wanted a dog, but, because of John's fear, it was never an option for the family. Fast forward to the present. John's sister has just bought her first house and is setting up a new home. John had always felt guilty about the whole dog thing and now seemed the perfect time to make amends. John hates dogs, but he loves his sister more.

This is actually backstory, though it remains on John's character sheet and is never "shared" with the reader. It was part of the character profile created for John. It, therefore, influences John's internal voice.

John has two elements to his backstory that are relevant to this scene:

1. John hates dogs.
2. John loves his sister.

So … while John may talk and act in a way that is influenced by his hatred of dogs, he ALSO talks and acts in a way that is influenced by his love for his sister. In this case, John's love trumps his hate.

The result is that John's actions do make sense, to the writer, however, they remain a mystery to the reader. The reader is forced to engage with John and build a rationale for his actions.

The result?

John is three-dimensional.

DIALOGUE

We have seen in the previous chapters how you can use internal voice, external voice and actions to force your reader to engage in your novel.

In this section, we will go one step further and look at dialogue in more detail.

You will learn how to write dialogue that is crisp and realistic.

You will also discover how to control your dialogue, so the reader remains engaged while fleshing out your character's personality.

We will discover new techniques that will help you stay on the show, not tell straight and narrow, learning tricks that will force you to kill TELL at its conception.

We will delve into the basic grammar of dialogue.

Finally, we will consider thoughts and their role, if any, in the Show, Don't Tell Meth-odology.

TAGGING DIALOGUE

When considering dialogue, many writers' eyes will glaze over, or they panic, as memories of incomprehensible school lessons come flooding back.

To help ease the pain, we will start with one of the simplest, yet most powerful, aspects of dialogue: tagging.

Tagging, which is also called attribution, is the process of telling a reader who is speaking.

For example:

"Hello," John said.

The 'John said' part is the tag or attribution, in that the dialogue is attributed to John.

The best way to consider tagging is with this one simple principle:

Tagging is about showing the reader WHO is speaking, and that is all. It is not about telling the reader HOW the person is speaking.

This is a simple principle but incredibly powerful.

Let's look at another example. In this one, we are doing it wrong. We are not only SHOWING the reader who is speaking but also TELLING them how:

"Hello," John growled.

In the above example, John didn't say anything; he growled it.

So, why is it so wrong to tag speech in this way?

The simplest answer is that it looks amateurish. It's the kind of dialogue you see in a school kid's textbook or from a two-bit creative writing class. If you use this type of

tagging, you will be flagging yourself as a newbie writer with little confidence in your ability to SHOW emotion.

There's also a more complex reason.

When you write "John growled", you are TELLING the reader the way in which John is speaking. As we know, TELLING is bad. It pushes the reader onto the back foot and forces them into a passive frame of mind. The alternative is to SHOW them how the speaker is speaking. Rather than relying on tagging to TELL the reader, the writer must use the context and texture of the scene to SHOW the reader. The words and actions that have come before the dialogue will SHOW the reader about John's frame of mind and will allow the reader to adjust the dialogue within his or her mind's eye.

So … what's the best practice when tagging dialogue?

The answer is to use SAID.

Said is a magic word. Readers are so used to seeing it that they start to ignore the word. It becomes a punctuation mark.

There is a side effect to this approach. When tagging dialogue with said, you can get a lot of said ping-pong action.

Take this example:

"Hi," John said.

"Hi," Peter said.

"How are you doing?" John said.

"Good," Peter said. "You?"

"Good. Thanks for asking," John said.

As you see, we have lots of 'John said' and 'Peter said' occurrences. There's actually a very simple solution to fix this. Don't tag.

Readers aren't stupid. If there are just two people speaking in a scene, the readers don't need to be told time and again who is speaking.

As we examined in a previous chapter, speech is written in an action/reaction process. This means the reader will know that if one character speaks first, another character will follow. If there are only two characters in a scene you can start to assume the reader will be able to follow the pattern.

This means you can just ignore the attribution after you first identify each speaker involved.

Here's the example from above, written with a bit of common sense:

"Hi," John said.

“Hi,” Peter said.

“How you doing?”

“Good. You?”

“Good. Thanks for asking.”

This is the basics of writing dialogue and is the foundation from which you should build. There are also a couple of additional writing habits that will bring sparkle to your writing.

The first is to consider where to add the tag. The best place is at the end of the dialogue. For example:

“Good. Thanks for asking,” John said.

Occasionally, you might want to spice it up or simply produce a different tempo in a long section of dialogue. In this case, put the tag where it fits naturally.

For example:

“Good,” John said. “Thanks for asking.”

However, here’s one word of warning. When moving tags from the end of the dialogue, don’t put it before the dialogue. It looks messy and marks you as an amateur.

This example is just plain wrong:

John said, “Good. Thanks for asking.”

Clarity in your writing should always be your goal, and, with this in mind, you should always stick with the attribution you set up first in your scene. If you start the scene saying, “the boy said,” don’t switch halfway through the scene. The boy should not suddenly become “Peter.” The thinking here is that, in a real-life conversation, you would not change the way you refer to a person mid-conversation, so why do it in your novel? However, once you are out of a scene, you can change, just not within a scene.

Another sign of amateur writing is the old “said John” approach. This is considered by many to be old-fashioned and outdated. Therefore, “John said” is the way forward. After all, you would write “he said,” but would you write, “said he”?

BEATS IN DIALOGUE

When applying the Show, Don’t Tell Methodology, which demands that writers stop using narrative summary to pass along backstory and plot, they will find themselves naturally gravitating to dialogue. You will write more dialogue than ever before, and you will try to use this dialogue to divulge key plot elements and backstory.

This is natural.

Dialogue is the most powerful tool in the author’s toolkit. A well-written section of

dialogue will push the plot forward and develop characters, while dragging the reader deeper into the novel.

However, it can create problems.

The renewed reliance on dialogue means that writers will find themselves creating scenes that contain much more dialogue than they would have included in the past.

Long sections of dialogue, especially between two people, can quickly become daunting for a reader. The back-and-forth creates an almost hypnotic rhythm, and the reader can miss the nuances of your writing. This can be further exaggerated when applying the only-use-said technique.

He said, she said, he said, she said … It can soon become tiresome.

That's where beats come into play. "What's a beat?" I hear you shout. Here's a section of dialogue which contains a beat (we've already seen this when talking about three-dimensional characters):

"I don't see any other birthday girl about, do you?" John looked around in an exaggerated motion, before leaning in and kissing his sister on the cheek. "You'd better open it quick. It's not the kind of present that likes to be kept waiting."

Now here's the same example without the beat:

"I don't see any other birthday girl about, do you? You'd better open it quick. It's not the kind of present that likes to be kept waiting."

See?

In this context, a beat is a section of action within dialogue (please note that the term beat has a different meaning when talking about the structure of a story). In the example above, John looks about and kisses his sister.

A beat dissects a section of dialogue, momentarily lifting the reader from the sequence. If used correctly, the beats will force the readers to renew their attention to the conversation, as the dialogue is stopped and started.

Beats can be used for three distinct purposes:

1. To control pace.
2. As a vehicle to add descriptions of people and places.
3. As a place for characterization.

Let's look at these in order.

Controlling pace is straightforward. Sections of dialogue can skip along at a good old pace. If two characters are exchanging short sentences, pages can whip by, as the reader absorbs what is being said. The problem here is that you don't always want the pace to be fast. Perhaps you just want the reader to pay more attention, or you

are trying to balance the overall pace of a scene. It might even be that you are separating two sections of action with a section of dialogue. For the action to have true impact, it needs to be sandwiched between slower sections, the light and dark. In these situations, beats are your friend.

The second reason for using beats is to add description. Whenever a reader comes across a new location or character, you should be adding description. The problem is that you don't want to dump long paragraphs of flowery prose. Instead, you want just enough for the reader to paint a picture in his or her mind's eye (more on this in the next chapter). However, if you are dealing with a complex location or a major character, you will want to layer in additional description, a line or two at a time. This is where beats can be extremely useful. We will look at using beats for description in more detail in the next section.

The final reason is characterization. If you have developed a complex character profile, you will be well aware of a character's internal influences. You will know in any given situation how the internal voice will influence the external words and actions. Beats are a great way to show this.

Look at the example below, we have seen this before, but let's look at it with new eyes:

John stood in the parking lot of the pub. It was dark outside, and the sky promised rain. A taxi pulled into the lot and made a circuit, before coming to a stop in front of John.

The driver let down the window, his dark skin and black hair visible in the dashboard lights. "You order a taxi?" His voice was tinged with an Oriental accent.

"No," John said, taking a small step back from the car.

The driver shrugged and fumbled with his radio, speaking into it in a language John didn't understand. A voice on the other end responded, too muffled for John to hear. The driver leaned over again.

"You sure, mate?"

"Yeah," John said. "I am sure."

"Ah …" the driver said. "Do you want a lift anyway?"

"Aren't you supposed to only pick up planned fares?" There was a pause. "It doesn't matter. I am waiting for my sister. She'll be here any moment."

"OK," the driver said and pulled out of the parking lot.

John watched the car leave, making a mental note of the license plate number.

Here's the same example, with the beats highlighted and explained:

John stood in the parking lot of the pub. It was dark outside, and the sky promised rain. A taxi pulled into the lot and made a circuit, before coming to a stop in front of John. [BEAT: This is a description delivered via narrative summary.]

The driver let down the window, his dark skin and black hair visible in the dashboard lights. [BEAT: This is a description before dialogue. The dark skin SHOWING the reader that the driver is not white.] "You order a taxi?" His voice was tinged with an Oriental accent.

"No," John said, taking a small step back from the car. [BEAT: Internal voice says he mistrusts Chinese people; this is reflected in his actions.]

The driver shrugged and fumbled with his radio, speaking into it in a language John didn't understand. A voice on the other end responded, too muffled for John to hear. The driver leaned over again. [BEAT: This is really a section of narrative summary, but, since it dissects dialogue, it is, technically, a beat.] "You sure, mate?"

"Yeah," John said. "I am sure."

"Ah …" the driver said. "Do you want a lift anyway?"

"Aren't you supposed to only pick up planned fares?" There was a pause. [BEAT: Slows the pace. Also suggests John is considering his next action. It is up to the reader to decide what John is thinking.] "It doesn't matter. I am waiting for my sister. She'll be here any moment."

"OK," the driver said and pulled out of the parking lot.

John watched the car leave, making a mental note of the license plate number. [BEAT: John watches the car and makes a note. This is his backstory at work, forcing John to think the worst of the driver, who may be Chinese.]

The final thing to say about beats is for them not to be overused. Long sections of dialogue are good. You do want to create a rhythm and allow the reader to become comfortable with your writing style. Yet there should be a balance. Too many beats and the dialogue drags; not enough and it whips by.

ADVERBS

Of all the principles and techniques that will improve your writing, how you deal with adverbs is perhaps the most powerful. In short, the removal of adverbs will make you a better writer, forcing you to avoid lazy writing and, instead, develop a writing style that will naturally engage your readers. In addition, the conscious removal of adverbs will force you to SHOW. You will find that adverbs are most commonly used in sections of TELL.

Stephen King is famously anti-adverb, in his book On Writing he writes:

"I believe the road to hell is paved with adverbs, and I will shout it from the rooftops. To put it another way, they're like dandelions. If you have one in your lawn, it looks pretty and unique. If you fail to root it out, however, you find five the next day…fifty the day after that…and then, my brothers and sisters, your lawn is totally, completely, and profligately covered with dandelions. By then you see them for the weeds they really are, but by then it's—GASP!!—too late."

So why had King got his knickers in a twist over adverbs?

Let's start with identifying an adverb.

Adverbs are words that modify verbs. A verb is a doing word (run, walk, fly, etc.). Most adverbs end in –LY, so they are easy to spot. This might sound complicated but don't worry. Once you learn to spot an adverb, they'll jump off the page at you, like dirty little trolls.

Here's an example:

He closed the door firmly.

Here 'closed' is the verb and 'firmly' is the adverb.

So what's so bad? You have a nice, clear picture of the door being closed, well, … firmly.

The problem is that, by using adverbs, you are TELLING the reader how the door is being closed. The reader isn't SHOWN, and there's no room for interpretation.

Remember TELLING is bad; SHOWING is good.

Let's now consider what happens if we remove the adverb:

He closed the door.

This doesn't tell us anything about how he closed the door. Surely this is worse? Well, in reality, the opposite is the case. When reading this sentence, which has no context, it makes no sense, but reading/writing is all about context.

What is essential to consider is what comes before and after the adverb.

Look back at our example of the closed door. If the paragraph before had described the person about to close the door as tiptoeing through a room, trying not to wake a baby, the closure of the door will mean one thing. However, if the paragraph before had described a moody teenager storming from a room after an argument, the door closure is something else.

The power here is that the context and texture of your writing will SHOW the reader and allow them to fill in the gaps. The reader will decide HOW the door is closed. The reader will become part of the process. The reader will build a picture in his or her

mind's eye, engaging with your words and becoming part of the story.

Now that's powerful stuff.

Sorry, but let me dwell on this a moment. What I am showing you here is a technique you can use that forces the reader to build the story in his or her mind. It allows you to force the reader to fully engage with your work.

What's more, by removing adverbs with ruthless precision, you are forcing yourself to write in a way that SHOWS not TELLS. It is almost impossible to TELL without adverbs. Each time you kill an adverb, you must look at your prose with new eyes. You must ask yourself, am I giving the reader enough context for this to make sense?

If you still feel that you need to let the reader know how the door is being closed, then you can SHOW not TELL. Instead of writing 'firmly' you should describe a door being closed firmly.

He closed the door, pulling it hard, causing a dull bang.

So far we have been talking about the use of adverbs in general prose. If you can eliminate as many of these as possible and then ensure the context is in place for your verbs to make sense, you will be a better author.

We now turn our attention to adverbs used in dialogue tagging (attribution).

The rule with dialogue is simple:

Under no circumstances should you use adverbs in relation to dialogue.

Never.

NEVER, ever.

NEVER, EVER, EVER.

Adverbs used in dialogue tags will, beyond any other bad habit, mark you as an amateur.

They are evil and must be destroyed.

Writers, lacking in confidence and mistrusting readers, often find themselves falling into the habit of explaining the motivation for a character's dialogue. They are worried that if they don't explain, then the meaning will be lost.

Consider the situation...

You have written a complex scene; you have thought carefully about a character's internal dialogue and how they will react. You want to make sure that this is not missed by the reader. So you explain your dialogue.

For example, in this scene, a mother asks her son about his homework. This is simple. The son hates homework, the mother wants him to do it.

It goes like this:

“Have you got any homework, Paul?” Paul’s mother asked harshly.

“Yeah, loads,” said Paul sadly.

“Well, you need to get it done before you can go out to play,” said Paul’s mother firmly.

Welcome to amateur hour. It pains me just to write this prose. I think I need a shower.

The use of adverbs (harshly, sadly and firmly) marks out the newbie writer, one lacking in confidence. Worse still, the adverbs just don’t work. TELLING never works. The reader will just turn off.

For this scene to work, the reader must be given the room to fill in the gaps alone.

Let’s look at the same example but with the adverbs killed dead:

“Have you got any homework, Paul?” asked Paul’s mother.

“Yeah, loads,” said Paul.

“Well, you need to get it done before you can go out to play.”

No difference. The reader still gets the gist of the exchange. Also, notice that the final attribution to Paul’s mother has been removed without the world exploding.

It could be argued that, in this example, the reader is not aware that Paul’s mother is annoyed with Paul and that the homework issue is a constant touchstone for arguments, and I agree. Using SHOW, you can’t pass along this type of information in a few words, but why would you want to?

Remember, context is everything.

All the words that come before this section of dialogue will give these words context. If this is the third time Paul has had homework, and the other two resulted in conflicts with his mom, the reader will fill in the gaps. The reader will know what Paul and his mother feel (or the reader thinks so anyway), and the reader will add weight to the words.

Remember, by consistently SHOWING you are forcing the reader to build their own picture of characters. In this case, the reader will already feel they understand Paul and his mother and will have built their own views on the characters’ motivations and actions.

This is engagement.

Still not convinced? Still think you need something extra?

OK, what about adding a beat?

“Have you got any homework, Paul?” asked Paul’s mother.

“Yeah, loads,” said Paul. He turned to look at his mother, a frown spread across his face.

“Well, you need to get it done before you can go out to play.”

Here, with “he turned to look at his mother, a frown spread across his face,” we’ve added some context, giving a clue about Paul’s internal voice. It’s all about context and not adverbs.

Finally, … adverbs are your friends in only one way. In fact, adverbs can be invaluable.

The reason?

If you have put an adverb in your writing, then you are almost certainly TELLING not SHOWING.

Adverbs are TELL flags. Hunt them out, kill them and turn the TELL to SHOW.

PUNCTUATING DIALOGUE

Punctuating dialogue correctly can trip up even the most talented author. From the outside, it can appear that the dialogue punctuation rules are a black box of contradictions.

Many authors shy away from the nitty-gritty of writing and feel that the grammar rules of punctuating dialogue are something an editor or proofreader should fix. They are wrong. The grammar rules regarding dialogue are the basic building blocks for your writing; if you have professional pride in your work, then you should be getting it right.

On a more pragmatic level, no one will care as much about your book as you do. Yes, professional editors and proofreaders will fix errors, but the more errors there are, the greater the chance those pesky buggers will slip through the editing net.

The best way to explain the rules of punctuating dialogue is by example. We will use the following section of dialogue to illustrate the steps required to properly punctuate.

Hi have you seen my cat said Bob. No said Bill I have no idea where your cat is. If you see my cat will you let me know questioned Bob looking sad. Of course replied Bill with a tone of concern.

The first rule is: new speaker, new paragraph.

This is easy to apply. Each time a new speaker talks, you place the line of dialogue in a new paragraph, with the first line indented.

We can see how this applies to our example:

Hi have you seen my cat said Bob.

No said Bill I have no idea where your cat is.

If you see my cat will you let me know questioned Bob looking sad.

Of course replied Bill with a tone of concern.

Next, we look at adding quotation marks.

Our next rule says that all dialogue should be placed within a pair of quotation marks.

For books to be published in the States, use as your default the double quotation marks (“ and ” which are the opening quote mark and the closing quote mark, respectively), which is our default for this book. [NOTE: For books to be published in England, use single (‘ and ’) quotes as your default.] However, keep in mind when reporting dialogue inside dialogue, to use the opposite of your default when repeating someone else’s words.

Here’s our example with quote marks added:

“Hi have you seen my cat” said Bob.

“No” said Bill “I have no idea where your cat is.”

“If you see my cat will you let me know” questioned Bob looking sad.

“Of course” replied Bill with a tone of concern.

Now, it’s time for punctuation.

When writing dialogue, you will often use tags. These are verbs that link the spoken words with the remainder of the sentence. Commonly used tags include said, asked, replied and many more. Without going into technical detail, to correctly punctuate spoken words from their tags, you must link them using a comma. If you use a period, the sentence is broken, and it no longer makes sense.

If we look at the second line of our example, we see:

“No” said Bill

This is a single sentence and, therefore, should end with a period, giving us:

“No” said Bill.

The tag in this sentence is said, and this must be connected to the corresponding dialogue. If you added a period at the end of the spoken word, it would disconnect the tag from the dialogue, breaking up the complete sentence, which is incorrect:

“No.” Said Bill. [WRONG]

Instead, we must link the spoken word and its tag with a comma.

This gives us:

“No,” said Bill. [CORRECT]

If we apply this to the full example, we get:

“Hi, have you seen my cat?” said Bob.

“No,” said Bill. “I have no idea where your cat is.”

“If you see my cat, will you let me know?” questioned Bob, looking sad.

“Of course,” replied Bill, with a tone of concern.

Please note that in the first and third lines we have used a question mark instead of a period since both are questions asked.

DESCRIPTION

In this section, we will examine the role of description in your writing. You will discover that description is an essential tool in the Show, Don't Tell Methodology. At the most basic level, it is used to paint a picture in the reader's mind, allowing the reader to clearly see your story's elements. However, on a subtler level, description can be used to express emotion.

The Show, Don't Tell Methodology teaches us that we must remove all backstory, emotion and plot development from the narrative and, instead, present it in a way that engages the reader.

It is essential that the reader is never told (NO TELLING in the narrative sections) about backstory/emotion/plot but, instead, discovers it as they read.

The first port of call in this process is dialogue. After all, how better to pass along backstory and plot than from the mouths of your characters?

However, emotion presents a new challenge. You will discover that the way the characters react, and how you describe this reaction, will help express emotion to your readers.

Painting a Picture

The famous author Stephen King provides us with the perfect analogy for writing. In his book On Writing, he describes writing as:

> *"Telepathy, of course. It's amusing when you stop to think about it—for years people have argued about whether or not such a thing exists—and all the time it's been right there, lying out in the open like Mr. Poe's 'The Purloined Letter'. All the arts depend upon telepathy to some degree, but I believe that writing offers the purest distillation."*

So what is King saying?

The best way to think about writing is a process of transferring an image from your mind to the mind of the reader. As a writer, you conjure a mental picture of a scene; a location, populated by characters who say and do things. You can see the characters, the location and the action. It is crystal clear.

Your job is then to take this image and put it in the mind of the reader.

See? Telepathy.

The problem you face is in taking the crystal-clear image from your mind and transferring it to the reader's mind.

This is where many inexperienced writers go awry. The instinctive approach is to describe the picture from your mind's eye in as much detail as possible. The theory being that the words on the page will conjure the same image in the mind of the reader.

And why not? This makes sense; the more detailed your description, the better the image you produce … right?

Actually, this is a bit of a rookie mistake.

The result is that, if your main character has blue eyes, the inexperienced writer will make them “piercing blue” or an “unusual shade of bright blue” or a “shade of blue that would bring the angels from the heavens”.

The problem is that, although the words of the English language are pretty good at describing stuff, they are nowhere near as detailed as the mind of the reader. The reader’s mind is full of detailed images, which go far beyond any written description.

As soon as you, the writer, try to pin down the description of an object, person or location, you are moving in the wrong direction.

The key here is the opposite of what you think.

Less is more.

What experienced writers know is that their job is not to describe an object/person/location in detail but, instead, to give the reader just ENOUGH description to get the reader’s mind engaged and working, just enough description to allow the reader to recall a stored image within his or her mind.

As a writer, you are not trying to transfer the exact image in your mind but, instead, get the reader’s mind to build its own picture.

Let’s go back to those blue eyes.

What’s wrong with just saying they are blue?

What happens when you say blue is that you leave a gap. The reader’s mind needs more than blue. The result is that the reader’s mind jumps to fill in the gap. It uses its library of images, all intensely detailed, to conjure a suitable set of blue eyes. This set of blue eyes will go far beyond anything you could have described.

Take this example:

The old man knocked on the door.

I am betting you have already formed a picture in your mind’s eye. It is probably a vivid picture of an old man knocking on a door.

Now try this:

The old man knocked on the blue door.

Another layer of detail forces you to reassess and reform your picture. Now the door is blue. The shade of blue and the old man will be different for each reader, but who cares?

Now, this:

The old man knocked on the battered blue door.

Again, another picture. The door has changed. The words have forced your mind to add in detail that was not there with the previous sentence.

What about this:

The old man knocked on the battered blue door. The ancient paint peeling away in large strips, the rotten wood clearly visible beneath.

Once again you are forced to reimagine your perception of the old man and the door. Your mind will have focused further, adding more layers.

But which is best?

It all depends on the scene.

If your scene calls for any old man to be knocking on any old door, with neither the man nor the door having any real relevance to the plot, then the first example is the best. It allows the reader to paint a picture without any limitations. You give the reader just enough to paint the picture but not so much that you are manipulating the image.

However, let's say that the door being old is important. In fact, the age of the door is a key plot point. Perhaps this is a portal to another dimension. The door shows its true age, not the age of the building. In this situation, you would want to add in more detail. You might find that battered is enough, though perhaps the peeling paint is inadequate.

The important concept here is that the plot and context will dictate the amount of description that is required.

In short, enough is enough.

TYPES OF DESCRIPTION

Not all description is created equal.

The Show, Don't Tell Methodology dictates that the role of the narrative is to paint a picture of the world for the reader.

The narrator is not there to pass along backstory or move the plot forward. The job of narration is describing stuff that's happening. Well, that's a little white lie. The narrator can also pass along the thoughts of characters, but we'll get to that in a later chapter. In other words, the only thing the narrator will be doing is describing the world in which the characters exist.

This is a really important point, so much so, I'll say it again.

The only thing that should be in your narrative is description. No internal voice (well, perhaps a bit of thought), but certainly NO BACKSTORY.

Narration is for description only (and some thoughts).

It is important that you can clearly define the types of description you are using in your novel.

The four types are:

1. Location description.
2. Character description.
3. Action description.
4. Emotion description.

Location description is the description of places. Remember, you are trying to paint a picture in the mind of the reader. This means that all locations require some level of description. This can vary from the interior of a car, to a simple room, to a vast alien landscape.

Character description is simply what characters look like. Not all characters will need detailed descriptions, but you will need to give every character enough description for your reader to form a mental image.

Action description is the words you use to describe what your characters are doing. This might be dialing a number on a phone or flying a plane. The context of the action will dictate the level of description required.

Emotion description is probably the only one of the four that raises an eyebrow. In the Show, Don't Tell Methodology we must avoid TELLING readers the way a character is feeling. This means we can't say, "John was sad." Instead, we must describe John being sad, hence emotion description.

This is the big one.

LOCATION DESCRIPTION

It is essential, as your reader progresses through the world you create that the reader can consistently create a mental image of the scenes you are describing.

The reader will constantly be painting a mental picture of the locales you describe; it is, therefore, essential you provide enough detail for the reader to paint a clear picture.

At all times, your reader will be creating an image in his or her mind. The reader will create this image independent of your input. They will be desperately scrambling for clues about the world your characters occupy and putting them together to create an image. It is up to you to control this image with your description.

You will need to constantly address the descriptions of your locations and characters,

so the reader can create an accurate picture.

This concept produces a simple rule:

If the location changes, you need a new description.

The problem that often arises has nothing to do with the timing of the description but the amount of description that is needed, which will vary from a simple ‘the bare room’ to paragraphs of detailed prose.

OK, this is not as complex as it sounds. To help you understand, here are the two situations in which you will need to add location description:

- If a character enters a new location.
- If a current location physically changes (it may start raining or a train may pull up to a station platform).

In short, change needs description.

Let’s look at some examples.

If a character is in a new location, then you need to add a description of that new location. If a character moves from A to B, you must describe B. If you fail to describe a new location, the reader loses the mental picture and quickly becomes confused. For example, if your main character was sitting in a dining room, but then gets up and moves to the kitchen, you would need to add a description of the kitchen.

The question is: how much description?

The answer depends on the importance of the location.

This is the key concept to location description.

The importance of the location dictates the amount of description. If the location is important, then you need to include a significant amount of description. If the location is trivial, then the description will be minimal.

This means that you will be creating, as needed, paragraphs of description as well as simple phrases, such as ‘the woods’. It all depends on context. What you choose to classify as important and trivial is up to you.

Let me pause a moment.

I can give you a better framework than ‘it is up to you’.

Here are a few rules of thumb:

- If more than one scene occurs in a certain location, then that location is important.
- If only one scene occurs in a location, but that scene is either essential to the plot or the location itself is an important element (e.g. edge of a cliff for a fight scene), then the location is important.
- If one scene occurs in one location, and the location is not relevant to the scene

(it could be any street), then the location is trivial.

- If the scene is a traveling scene only, that is, getting a character from one location to another (think inside of a plane), then the location is trivial.

Let's first look at the level of description for an important location.

For example, if you are writing a story about a man stuck in a prison cell, then the cell is an important location (there will be more than one scene in this location, plus the cell is an important part of the scene) and will need a chunk of description, probably a couple of paragraphs. There will necessarily be a number of scenes set in this location, and it is, therefore, an important backdrop for your story.

How you present this description will also depend on the context of the location.

If the location is important but will only contain one scene or two, then you will get away with dumping the description into one or two paragraphs. However, if the location is important AND will be the location for multiple scenes, then you need a far more detailed description. However, you will not want to dump a massive section of description, and, therefore, you'll be spreading it out over a number of pages.

This leaves you with two choices:

Add all of the description in one go or spread it out.

This isn't really a one-time decision. The scene within each story will help you decide. Let's look in a little more detail.

If the location is used in just one scene, then add the description at the start of the scene in one chunk.

If the location is used in more than one scene, then you need to take a different approach. In this situation, you start with a significant description, probably a single paragraph. Then, as the scenes progress, you layer in more description, one line at a time.

Let's go back to our prison cell …

John has been captured and placed in a cell. He will escape at the end of the scene, and that's the last the reader will see of the cell. However, even though the prison cell is only used in this one scene, it is still an important location and a significant plot point and is worthy of significant description.

In this situation, you present the description in a couple of paragraphs:

The cell was a small, perfectly square room, about six foot in height with each wall no more than six feet in length. A single window, also perfectly square, was halfway

up one wall and let in a small amount of light, though blocked by a grill. The only other source of light was a single bulb that hung from the center of the ceiling.

Along the opposite wall was a squat bed. Its frame was steel, but years of use had left numerous scratches and nicks. On the bed was a yellow mattress mottled with stains. The only way in or out of the cell was a single heavy gray door.

Now let's look at the same description but this time in a different context.

This time John has been locked up in the cell and will not escape until near the end of the book. The cell will be the location for a number of scenes and is, therefore, a vital location for the story. In this case, the location will appear in a number of scenes. This requires a different approach. When the location is first introduced, we provide the reader with a significant, but not extended, description. Then, as the scenes progress, the author will layer in a number of short descriptions to add texture to the location.

Here's the initial location description:

The cell was a perfectly square room, about six foot in height with each wall no more than six feet in length. A single window was halfway up one wall, and a single bulb hung from the center of the ceiling. A bed consisting of a yellowed mattress rested on a steel frame. The only way in or out of the cell was a heavy gray door.

Here you can see we have cut the initial description to a single paragraph. It is enough for the reader to form a picture in his or her mind's eye.

In this situation, where a location will be used for a number of scenes, you have a little more freedom. What you can do is layer in more detailed descriptions. You could write in a couple sections where the main character examines the room. Perhaps he tests out the bed and then looks at the window or perhaps he bangs on the door or spots some writing on the wall. In each case, you would layer in more description.

For example:

John looked closely at the bed. The mattress was yellowed and mottled with stains ranging in color from blood red to deep, dark brown. He lifted the mattress. The frame was gunmetal gray, though it was scratched and dented. On the left-hand leg, someone had scratched out a series of tally marks, the lines of white paint underneath clearly visible. Paul counted to thirty before giving up.

This process produces a layering effect. Each time it is repeated, the location is further ingrained in the reader's mind.

Remember the key rules of thumb, when writing description:

- If it changes, describe it.
- If it is trivial, then a line of description will do.

• If it is important, then go to town with your description.

CHARACTER DESCRIPTION

Having looked at location description, we now turn our attention to character description. Many of the rules of thumb applied to location description will also apply to character description.

As the reader progresses through your book, the reader will be constantly creating and recreating a picture of the current scene in his or her mind's eye. Each scene will usually consist of both the location and the characters. It is your job, as the writer, to provide adequate character description.

What is adequate?

In short, you need to provide enough description that the reader can paint a picture of the character in his or her mind. The same rule applies here as for the location description: the more important the character, the more description that is required.

So, for example, your main character should have a detailed, multilayered description. This should consist of not only a basic physical description but also the character's physical tics and traits. On the flip side, minor characters should have description levels that match their importance (or lack of it). If the character is a fleeting component of a minor scene, then a simple 'the postman' description may well be enough.

One rule of thumb to use when writing character description is that, if a character appears in just one scene, then include just a simple one-line description. However, the more scenes in which the character appears, the more description is required.

As an example, here's the opening description for the old man, who is one of the two main characters in Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea.* This description is in the second paragraph of the story:

The old man was thin and gaunt with deep wrinkles in the back of his neck. The brown blotches of the benevolent skin cancer the sun brings from its reflection on the tropic sea were on his cheeks. The blotches ran well down the sides of his face and his hands had the deep-creased scars from handling heavy fish on the cords. But none of these scars were fresh. They were as old as erosions in a fishless desert.

Let's go back to our mate John for an example.

Imagine that you are writing a book in which a package has been sent to John. It is important that the reader knows John received the package; therefore, you write this short scene:

The ring of the doorbell echoed down the sparse hallway. John stepped into the hall and walked to the closed door. Turning the brass handle, he swung open the door.

On the doorstep stood the uniformed postman, a brown crumpled package in his hands.

"John Smith?" the postman said, looking at the address label.

"Yep," John said.

"Here you go," the postman said, handing over the parcel and turning to leave.

"Thanks," John said, as he closed the door.

In this section, the postman is 'uniformed'. This is the postman's only appearance in the book. He was nothing more than a tool to get the parcel into John's hands. Therefore, there is no need to layer in a detailed description.

Now … let's look at another example.

Let's take the same scene, but, this time, the postman is of more importance. It turns out the postman is actually a hitman, who is following John. A few scenes later we will see John going to the pub for a drink with his friends, and he's going to bump into the postman (who is following him) but is not going to recognize him. However, we want the keen-eyed reader to make the link.

Suddenly the importance of the postman has increased. Yet, we face one small problem. If we were to layer in a very detailed description, the reader would instantly perk up, sensing something else is going on here. We've been trained to match the description level with importance. More on this later.

So, in this example, we are looking to balance the description with enough details to make an impression but not so much that the reader is instantly suspicious.

The ring of the doorbell echoed down the sparse hallway. John stepped into the hall and walked to the closed door. Turning the brass handle, he swung open the door. On the doorstep stood the uniformed postman, a brown crumpled package in his hands. The postman was taller than John, so his smiling face beamed downward, adorned with a long handlebar moustache.

"John Smith?" the postman said, looking at the address label.

"Yep," John said.

"Here you go," the postman said, handing over the parcel and turning to leave.

"Thanks," John said, as he closed the door.

This time we've added in a new line of description. Though not subtle, it is enough for the reader to paint a new picture of the postman. It is also enough that, when we mention 'handlebar moustache' later (after a couple more scenes), the reader may make the connection.

One little tip … the postman in this scene is actually based on someone I know, who,

incidentally, is not a postman. So, when I wrote this scene, I had an image of my friend in my mind. Though I only added the moustache detail in the text, the character's appearance is fully detailed in my mind's eye.

The final type of character description is for your main characters. If you look back at the location description section, you will see the concept of layering description. The same layering concept applies for your main characters. Though we want you to build detailed descriptions of your characters' features and actions, we don't want to do it all at once. In fact, we want to do the opposite.

When a major character is first introduced to the reader, you should include a couple of lines of description. At this point, you are focusing on the major features. You are trying to paint a very rough outline of the character, just enough for the reader to conjure an image in his or her head.

For example, "six-foot-tall, black hair and blue eyes" will be enough in the first instance.

Then, over the following scenes, you need to start layering in more detailed descriptions. These will not only be physical descriptions but also habits and tics that will bring your character to life. If your character strokes his beard while thinking, then you need to add this in early on. A good place to do this is via beats. However, you must resist the temptation to go overboard. A line or two of description every couple scenes will be enough. You must not overload the reader.

The problem is that each time you add a layer of description, you are triggering the reader to redraw the image in his or her mind's eye. If you change too quickly, or too often, you will just confuse the reader. If done methodically, this system will allow you to build a complex series of physical attributes for your characters. Over time the reader will pick up on the traits and allow you to add another level to your storytelling.

"Remember that guy in the pub with the moustache?" said John, stroking his beard. "I am sure I've seen him before."

It has already been said that the level of description must match the importance of the character, but this is worthy of a little further examination. Over the years, readers have been trained to see low levels of description as an indication that the character in question is unimportant.

This is the Red Shirt principle.

In the '60s sci-fi series Star Trek, it becomes an in-joke that any red-shirted crew member, joining Kirk and his team for an off-ship planet visit, was doomed to a grisly death. A fan, with too much time on his hands, worked out that, of the fifty-nine crew-members killed in the original series, forty-three (73%) were wearing red shirts. Of

course, red shirts were just that, characters wearing red shirts. They had no backstory, no development and often no name.

Your novel will be packed with red shirts, characters with so little description that the reader will see but ignore them. The postman with the moustache was a red shirt (before he became a hitman). These are the glue that holds your plot together.

Now … a word of warning.

In some stories you will want to trick the reader; you will want to sneak an important character into a scene but disguise them as a red shirt. As a rule, this should be avoided. There is no more guaranteed way to upset a reader than to have a red shirt turn out to be a major part of a plot.

Remember the unwritten rule: the more description, the more important the character.

The reader knows this rule; the reader has been trained over the years of consuming books and movies to understand that characters with no backstory can be ignored. It is an unwritten convention. If you simply break this convention to trick the reader, the reader will be annoyed.

But what happens if you want to hide a character in plain sight?

Perhaps you are writing a crime genre book, and you want the killer in the plot without the reader knowing it yet. What you mustn't do in this situation is make the character a Red Shirt. Instead, you can use stereotyping.

Stereotyping is when you call upon a well-understood character type to shortcut the description process. If I say, "frail old man" or "huge bodybuilder" or "grumpy teenager", they all conjure up a distinctive image. A stereotype.

So, you should routinely use stereotypes to shortcut your description process. In fact, the best way to wield a red shirt is via a stereotype. Look at our postman (without the moustache). When I said "postman", you conjured up a ready-made image. I didn't need to say anything else; you had already done all the work.

However, you can also use this stereotype to distract the reader.

This is not the same as tricking the reader by making a red shirt a major character; this is using the reader's stereotype to hide a character in plain sight.

In Roald Dahl's short story, *The Landlady*, Dahl gives us a master class in stereotyping.

The story goes like this: The main character, Billy Weaver, stays at a bed-and-breakfast run by a charming old lady. The twist to the story is that … (look away now if you've not read the story) the old lady is a serial killer who plans to poison and stuff Billy.

The problem Dahl faces is how can he trick the reader into thinking the landlady is harmless until the last possible moment? The sleight of hand comes in the unexpected

behavior of the landlady. Dahl intentionally has his killer in plain sight.

The first we see of the landlady is this description:

She was about forty-five or fifty years old, and, the moment she saw him, she gave him a warm, welcoming smile.

Then on the next page:

She was halfway up the stairs, and she paused with one hand on the stair-rail, turning her head and smiling down at him with pale lips.

Add to this the narrator's insistence that she is a "dotty lady", and who would expect her of anything harmful?

The power of Dahl's writing is that he gives us what we expect.

The narrator TELLS us that she is a dotty old woman, and we believe him. Why wouldn't we? Dahl wrote Charlie and the Chocolate Factory. He wouldn't lie to us, would he? Dahl plays on our stereotypes. We are told it's an old woman, so we see an old woman.

The result is a memorable twist. This all said the foundational principles for character description are not complicated.

Here are the rules:

- If you are describing your main character, layer in description over a number of scenes.
- If the character will play a part in more than one scene, add a few lines of description (and perhaps one layer or two).
- If the character is a red shirt, then less is more.

ACTION DESCRIPTION

We have examined the role of both location and character description, discovering that the amount of description needed depends on the importance of the location or the character. We now turn our attention to action description. The best place to start, when discussing description of action, is to clarify exactly what is meant by 'action'.

In the context of novel writing, action is anything that happens.

So, if your main character makes a cup of coffee, this is action and would need a description.

If your character is watching someone else making a cup of coffee, then this is action and also needs a description. If your character is fighting off three ninjas, who are riding genetically mutated unicorns, then, yes, this is awesome, but it is also action.

From a technical viewpoint, there is no differentiation between the type or intensity

of action. If it happens in the scene, then it needs a description.

Let's start with a little word of warning. It is very easy to slip into TELL when action enters your story. TELL must always be avoided.

Perhaps this is the time for a little confession. When I wrote the examples for this book, I kept, unintentionally, slipping into TELL. I just couldn't help it. However, with each rewrite, I weeded out the TELL and replaced it with SHOW. The moral of the story is that we all, accidentally, use TELL from time-to-time. It doesn't make you a bad person, as long as you work hard to remove it with each edit.

Here's an example from our mate John:

John made a cup of coffee and sat down to answer his emails.

This is TELLING. You are telling the reader what is happening, you are not showing via description.

Here's the same section but as SHOWING:

John picked up the kettle and walked to the sink. He turned on the tap and allowed the water to fill the kettle. He returned to the work surface, plugged in the kettle and turned it on.

This is SHOWING. In this example of action, you are SHOWING the reader what is happening. The reader is part of the story, can see it unfold before his or her eyes, and, therefore, the reader remains an active part of the process.

You must constantly be on the lookout for TELLING. If the narrator is telling, then stop and use SHOWING.

Now … it pains me to say this, but there's an exception to the rule. It is just that, an exception; it is not an excuse for you to consistently TELL.

It is OK (sometimes, occasionally) to use TELL. However, it must be done consciously and with forethought.

Here's the problem...

If you are showing everything, each little action, then your book can rapidly become very boring. If taken to the extreme, the concept of SHOW says that you should describe every step, every breath, even every blink of an eye.

Of course, this is stupid.

Blink. Blink. Blink.

But it does present a problem.

How do you deal with the mundane stuff?

Do you really want to describe your character making a cup of tea? Probably not, … but go back and look at those two passages, the second (with SHOWING) is more

enjoyable to read. You feel part of the process. Therefore, it becomes a balance. You want to SHOW as much as possible, but sometimes a simple 'John made a cup of coffee' is the best option.

The key is that, when you do TELL, you should know you are doing it and, most importantly, WHY you are doing it.

You can get away with a bit of TELL if something happens in a scene that is:

- So mundane it verges on boring if described.
- So commonly understood that there is a shared understanding of the action.

If we go back to John and his caffeine habit:

John made a cup of coffee.

This statement fulfills the two above-noted criteria. It is both mundane and commonly understood. We all know what it means to make coffee, plus no one wants to read a description of someone making coffee.

OK, let's look at this principle in action …

Say your story calls for two scenes. The first scene is in Location A, and the second in Location B. Your main character will be getting in his car at Location A and traveling to Location B.

This means you will need to write the first scene in Location A and the second in Location B.

If you are strictly applying the SHOW principle, then you are going to have to write a third scene. This is the 'traveling scene' in which the character moves between locations. The problem is that this particular traveling scene is pointless, as it fails to move the plot forward or develop the characters and is, therefore, just a waste of the reader's attention (and there's NOTHING more valuable than the reader's attention).

The answer to this problem is simpler than it may first seem.

Your reader is not stupid. The reader will understand that the character will travel from Location A to Location B. Therefore, you don't need to SHOW this, and you can just let it happen off the page.

One of the great advantages of the Show, Don't Tell Methodology is that the reader is firmly engaged in the world of the narrator. Since you have actively tied the reader to this world, the reader can accept that events occur away from the narrator.

This can be used to a greater or lesser extent.

At one extreme the reader will accept that, if a character leaves Location A and gets in their car, then the character will drive in that car to Location B. This is a mundane and commonly understood event, and, therefore, there's no need to describe it to the

reader.

To a greater extent, the reader is also able to understand that characters do things off the page. So, if a character leaves one scene and then turns up a couple of scenes later with a broken arm, this is acceptable. You will probably need to explain the broken arm in dialogue, but you don't need to describe it in the action.

The result is, to avoid writing a complex and pointless traveling scene, do the following:

"OK, I'm off," John said, as he picked up his car keys.

"Where are you going?" Sally said, her voice drifting from the next room.

"To see Paul."

"Right. See you later."

***

John slowed the car as he pulled into Paul's drive, the house ahead of him looming tall in the morning light.

The three-asterisk spacer indicates to the reader that time has passed and/or a change of location has occurred, and something has happened while not on the page (in this case John has driven his car). It also indicates that whatever happened was not important enough to be in the story.

To summarize, the rules for writing description are commonsense principles:

- Ensure that you SHOW description not TELL.
- Unless SHOWING is mundane and boring, then TELL. Remember, a little TELL goes a long way.

EMOTION DESCRIPTION

Descriptions of characters, actions and events are normally something authors find easy to understand, once the basic elements have been explained. However, weaving emotion into your novel, without being able to fall back on TELL (he was sad), is no easy task.

The key to understanding the best way to deal with emotion description is to revert to the principles of show, don't tell. The fundamental concept of the system is that, if you can provide a truthful description of a character's words and actions, this will stimulate an emotion in the reader.

At the most basic level, TELLING the reader someone is sad will do nothing, but

SHOWING the reader someone is sad, by describing the actions of a sad person, will stimulate a level of sadness in the reader.

If we can SHOW the reader an emotion, describing the emotion in a way that triggers the reader's own internal emotions, we are going to produce a far more powerful reading experience than one in which we TELL the reader how to feel.

Deep stuff.

Here's an example:

John cried with sadness.

This is pure TELL. We are TELLING the reader that John is sad. This is emotionally sterile. We don't want the reader to know John is sad, we want the reader to feel John's sadness.

Try this example:

John slumped into the chair. He leaned forward, placed his head in his hands and sobbed. Huge body-shaking sobs racked John's body, each coming in a wave, and, with every sob, he let out a low whimper.

In this example, we SHOW the reader that John is sad. We are not TELLING the reader what John is feeling; we describe John's actions while experiencing sadness. In the process, we create a narrative space. Since we don't tell the reader what John is feeling, the reader is forced to work it out alone. It is this narrative space that the reader will fill. The reader tries to match John's actions with those actions that the reader has experienced. The reader's brain will match the actions to an emotion. In the process, the reader triggers that same emotion within his or her mind.

Your job, and perhaps the most difficult part of writing, is to write descriptions of an emotion in action that are truthful reflections of the way a character would act when experiencing that certain emotion. The more truthful your description, the deeper your understanding of human nature, the more powerful your writing will become.

Now imagine this same example at the end of a scene where John has just returned from the hospital, after identifying his five-year-old daughter's body following her death in a car crash.

Hold that image in your mind, and read the example a second time:

John slumped into the chair. He leaned forward, placed his head in his hands and sobbed. Huge body-shaking sobs racked John's body, each coming in a wave, and, with every sob, he let out a low whimper.

John cried with sadness, my arse!

NARRATIVE VOICE

When teaching the Show, Don't Tell Methodology, one of the most common worries I hear from authors is that they feel scared to use the narrative voice for anything other than describing the location of events.

In this section, I will look closely at the narrative voice and will explain that it is far more than a descriptive tool. I will show that the narrative voice should also be used to pass along a character's thoughts to the reader. However, we will explain the best way in which to do this and how to avoid it slipping into TELL.

TYPES OF NARRATIVE VOICE

In the next section, we will examine the role of the narrator and look at the types of things you should and shouldn't put in your narrative summary. However, before we look at these deeper technical issues, we must first examine what is meant by the narrator.

In its simplest terms, the narrator is the voice in your book which is not that of any of the characters. In other words, anything you write which does not come from the mouths of your characters is narrative summary. However, the narrator is not you.

Let me explain.

Let's go back to a well-worn example:

John walked into the cramped three-bedroom house, carrying a large cardboard box with a massive pink ribbon tied into a bow at the top. He found his sister leaning on the door frame of the open back door, the final drags of a cigarette in her hand. When she saw John, she flicked the cigarette butt into the garden and then turned to him, her face beaming with a smile.

"John, is that for me?" she said, nodding at the box. ***John smiled back, pushing the box onto the kitchen table, its awkward weight evident.***

"I don't see any other birthday girl about, do you?" ***John looked around in an exaggerated motion, before leaning in and kissing his sister on the cheek.***

"You'd better open it quick. It's not the kind of present that likes to be kept waiting."

She danced from foot-to-foot, as she tugged at the pink ribbon. As soon as the ribbon fell away, the box lid forced its way open with an explosion of black fur, ears, eyes and nose. John's sister scooped up the dog.

"A puppy. I love him."

In the example above, all the narration has been put in bold. You can see that the narrator is the person telling you the story. The narrator is the person who is commu-

nicating directly with the reader.

Therefore, novels contain two types of voice: the characters' voices AND the narrator's voice.

(Please note, this is not true for most non-fiction books. In non-fiction, the narrator's voice is often that of the writer).

However, and this is important, the narrator's voice is NOT the author's voice.

The narrator is a 'character' who the author controls. The narrator can, and should, say things that an author believes to be untrue; that's why it is called fiction.

In broad terms, there are two types of narrators for fiction books:

- First person.
- Third person.

There is also a second person narrative voice but this is difficult to apply well and it, therefore, rarely used. More importantly, your reader will be expecting a first or third person viewpoint.

In first person, the narrator is speaking directly to the reader from personal experience. The narrator will know nothing more of the story than is revealed by the characters. You can spot a first-person narrator a mile off, by the use of first-person pronouns (I, we, our, etc.).

Here's a first-person narration example from the opening section of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* [without updating anything per today's grammar and spelling rules]:

> *The Nellie, a cruising yawl, swung to her anchor without a flutter of the sails, and was at rest. The flood had made, the wind was nearly calm, and being bound down the river, the only thing for it was to come to and wait for the turn of the tide.*
>
> *The sea-reach of the Thames stretched before us like the beginning of an interminable waterway. In the offing the sea and the sky were welded together without a joint, and in the luminous space the tanned sails of the barges drifting up with the tide seemed to stand still in red clusters of canvas sharply peaked, with gleams of varnished sprits. A haze rested on the low shores that ran out to sea in vanishing flatness. The air was dark above Gravesend, and farther back still seemed condensed into a mournful gloom, brooding motionless over the biggest, and the greatest, town on earth.*
>
> *The Director of Companies was our captain and our host. We four affectionately watched his back as he stood in the bows looking to seaward. On the whole river there was nothing that looked half so nautical. He resembled a pilot, which to a seaman is trustworthiness personified. It was difficult to realize his work was not out there in the luminous estuary, but behind him, within the brooding gloom.*

For third person the narrator is telling the story and has a wider knowledge of the

story than is told by the characters. By this, I mean that the narrator knows what is happening in events beyond those described in the scenes.

As a third-person narrator example, here's the opening to Jane Austin's *Pride and Prejudice* [again without updating anything per today's grammar and spelling rules]:

It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife.

However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighbourhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of the surrounding families, that he is considered the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters.

"My dear Mr. Bennet," said his lady to him one day, "have you heard that Netherfield Park is let at last?"

Mr. Bennet replied that he had not.

"But it is," returned she; "for Mrs. Long has just been here, and she told me all about it."

Mr. Bennet made no answer.

"Do you not want to know who has taken it?" cried his wife impatiently.

"You want to tell me, and I have no objection to hearing it."

This was invitation enough.

"Why, my dear, you must know, Mrs. Long says that Netherfield is taken by a young man of large fortune from the north of England; that he came down on Monday in a chaise and four to see the place, and was so much delighted with it, that he agreed with Mr. Morris immediately; that he is to take possession before Michaelmas, and some of his servants are to be in the house by the end of next week."

"What is his name?"

"Bingley."

At this point, all you really need to know about narrative voice is that there are two types of voice: first and third.

If you go delving into this topic elsewhere, you will find much written on the theory of narrative (also called viewpoint). It is an academic subject in its own right. You will find discussions of different types of narrators and their roles in the story. This is all good and, mostly, very interesting. However, for the context of this book, it is not needed. That all said, it will be beneficial for you to have a basic grasp of the different types of third person viewpoints, since it will allow you to create a consistent narrative voice.

The first important element is the difference between third person subjective and

third person objective. If writing in third person subjective the narration will include the thoughts and feelings of the characters. If writing in third person objective the narrator will ONLY include description and no thoughts or feelings.

- Third person subjective – includes description plus thoughts and feelings.
- Third person objective – includes just description NO thoughts and feelings.

You may have noticed that third person subjective includes thoughts and this is something we have, so far, discouraged, we will return to this topic later.

Having established if you are writing in objective or subjective, there is another element to consider and this is whether you are writing in third person limited or third person omniscient.

If writing in third person limited the narrator will focus each section on a limited number of characters, normally just one. The narrator will only be able to describe things that these characters can see and experience. If writing in third person omniscient the narrator has knowledge of all characters at all times.

Third person limited, in modern writing this is, by far, the most common type of narrative viewpoint. In short, the narrative summary is written with a focus on just one character. This means that, though each chapter will be written from a third-person perspective, the events described will focus on a single character.

The chances are if you have started writing and know nothing about narrative and viewpoint, you'll be writing in third person limited.

Third person omniscient is a less common narrative perspective, though it is still seen in modern writing. Third person omniscient has the narrator's focus on multiple characters. This means that, even though there may be one main character, you will often see chapters that focus fully on other characters. Two very popular examples of this narrative viewpoint are The Da Vinci Code and the Game of Thrones series.

Therefore, we create the following profile:

- Third person subjective / limited – Narrator has knowledge of events and thoughts of a limited number of characters.
- Third person objective / limited – Narrator has knowledge of events from the viewpoint of a limited number of characters.
- Third person subjective / omniscient – Narrator has knowledge of events and thoughts of all characters.
- Third person objective / omniscient – Narrator has knowledge of events from all characters.

OK, so let's get down to the nitty-gritty.

This book is written for authors who write in third person. Yes, the techniques will work for first-person authors, and, yes, authors of first-person stories will benefit from applying these techniques. However, the focus is on third person.

Now, before we move on, let me introduce one additional phrase: narrative summary. In the context of this book, narrative summary is everything the narrator says.

Go back and look at the example at the top of this page. Everything in bold is narrative summary.

Got it?

Good.

USING NARRATIVE VOICE

Having looked at narrative voice (first and third) and defined narrative summary (the stuff the narrator says), we now turn our attention to using the narrator within the Show, Don't Tell Methodology.

There's one concept that's essential for you to grasp if you are going to transform your writing, and that is that not everything the narrator says is TELLING.

Let me put that another way.

Not all narrative summary is TELLING. Many people learning the Show, Don't Tell Methodology get caught up in the narrative summary and seem to flinch away from the narrator's voice. They become fearful that anything that they put in the narrative will be seen as TELLING.

Well, that's not true. In fact, it is the opposite. The narrator plays an essential part in your story.

Let's return to a rule of thumb that you can use when assessing your writing:

- Dialogue is for moving the plot forward and passing along backstory.
- Narrative summary is for describing actions, locations and people.

Therefore, narrative summary is not your enemy but TELLING is.

So what's TELLING?

Well, TELLING is stuff you put in the narrative summary that is something other than describing actions, locations and people.

TELLING in the narrative summary involves one of the following:

- The character's backstory – This is when the narrator TELLS the reader about something that has happened in the past.
- The story's plot – This is when the narrator TELLS the reader about event events and provides meaning. This is not the same as describing events, this is summar-

izing events and giving them meaning. This is often called ‘plot dumping’.

- The actions not being described – This is when the narrator TELLS the reader about action. For example, “the boy was sad” is TELLING, while “the boy sobbed, tears streaming down his cheeks” is SHOWING.

Let me just dwell on the actions not being described for a moment. It’s been said that narrative summary should contain action, so how is an action not being described now TELLING?

Look at this example:

A beautiful woman walked down the crowded street.

Description?

No. This is TELLING. The author is TELLING the reader how the woman is beautiful and how the streets are crowded. The narrator must do the opposite and SHOW. The narrator should describe the woman and the crowded street.

Try it. Pop open a blank Word doc and write out a paragraph that DESCRIBES both the woman and the street.

Once you have grasped the basics of show, don’t tell, there’s one more level of understanding that’s needed if you are to lift your writing to the highest level.

Much of the techniques we’ve looked at so far in this book are pushing you toward a very filmic style of writing. There are times when the technique is calling for a style of writing that seems to consist almost exclusively of dialogue and described action. I’ve even suggested a principle called the Camera Technique. However, if your entire novel contains only description, then you are missing one of the most wonderful aspects of novel-writing.

Novels give the reader the ability to gain an insight into the writer’s interpretation of life. The writer, using the narrator, can provide the reader with a unique way of seeing the world.

In short, a great novel will change the way you see the world.

Deep stuff, I know, but this is the secret sauce that will transform your writing from good to great.

Here’s an example to illustrate this point.

This comes from Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea*. It’s about ten pages into the book and comes just after the old man has caught a huge fish …

Then he began to pity the great fish that he had hooked. He is wonderful and strange

and who knows how old he is, he thought. Never have I had such a strong fish nor one who acted so strangely. Perhaps he is too wise to jump. He could ruin me by jumping or by a wild rush. But perhaps he has been hooked many times before and he knows that this is how he should make his fight. He cannot know that it is only one man against him, nor that it is an old man. But what a great fish he is and what will he bring in the market if the flesh is good. He took the bait like a male and he pulls like a male and his fight has no panic in it. I wonder if he has any plans or if he is just as desperate as I am?

This is a perfect example of narrative voice being used to add depth but without TELLING.

Remember TELLING is either dumping backstory or TELLING the reader about actions or a character's feelings.

The above example is not TELLING; it is narrative summary at its best.

Why? What makes this SHOW, not TELL?

The key comes in the opening two sentences:

Then he began to pity the great fish that he had hooked. He is wonderful and strange and who knows how old he is, he thought.

Those two little words, "he thought", are magic.

What this does is to set up the remainder of the paragraph as the character's thoughts. The narrator is not TELLING us what the old man is thinking; he is SHOWING us the character's thoughts.

He is describing what the old man is thinking.

And this is the key … you can use the narrator to SHOW the reader what a character is thinking.

Even as I write this, I worry deeply that I have not explained the subtle difference here in enough detail.

If the narrator TELLS the reader the story, then you are in trouble. However, if the narrator, on occasion, SHOWS the reader what the character is thinking, then a world of magic is created.

If the narrator summarizes the character's thoughts and presents them in a neat package TELLING the reader what was thought, then it's wrong.

It may be the case that the character is summarizing past events and drawing conclusions, but these are the thoughts of the narrator. As long as the narrator continues to describe the character's thought, it's all good.

And this is the difference between third person subjective and third person objective.

If you are writing in third person objective, you will never be in a situation where the narrator is passing a character's thoughts. However, if writing in third person subjective, you have a free license to express a character's inner dialogue and you should. The key, of course, is to frame them as thoughts. You must always be SHOWING the reader what a character is thinking, not having your narrator TELLING a reader what a character is thinking.

Consider these four little technical points, when using narrative summary to present a character's thoughts:

- Thoughts are always happening in the present. They are a reflection of the current events. The thoughts might be about past events, but they will be occurring in the present.
- Thoughts are not to pass backstory to the reader. They are not to give the reader a vital clue about the plot. They are to add context to a character and the character's reaction to the current events.
- Thoughts are not to present emotion. They are not a shortcut from describing/showing how a person is reacting to an event. The thoughts might reflect an emotion, but they should never just state an emotion.
- Thoughts should be used cautiously. If used on occasion, to reinforce key issues, thoughts via the narrative summary can be very powerful. However, if overused, they lose their power very quickly.

In the next section, we will look at some real-life examples of narrative summary in action.

NARRATIVE SUMMARY IN ACTION

In the previous section, we discovered that narrative summary has an additional element beyond pure description, presenting characters' thoughts. We also showed how these thoughts should reflect what a character is thinking about the current situation, not as a tool to pass along backstory, plot or, God forbid, emotion.

Below are two real-life examples of narrative summary in action. They are both taken from Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*. The aim of these examples is to demonstrate how narrative summary can be used to enhance your writing without slipping into TELLING.

When examining these examples, please hold in your mind the following:

- Watch for TELLING.
- Notice that the narrative summary is cemented in the present.
- Recognize they are a character's thoughts.

Example One

This is taken from the first half of the book, where the old man and the boy prepare for the fishing trip.

“What do you have to eat?” the boy asked.

“A pot of yellow rice with fish. Do you want some?”

“No. I will eat at home. Do you want me to make the fire?”

“No. I will make it later on. Or I may eat the rice cold.”

“May I take the cast net?”

“Of course.”

There was no cast net and the boy remembered when they had sold it. *But they went through this fiction every day. There was no pot of yellow rice and fish and the boy knew this too.*

“Eighty-five is a lucky number,” the old man said. “How would you like to see me bring one in that dressed out over a thousand pounds?”

“I’ll get the cast net and go for sardines. Will you sit in the sun in the doorway?”

“Yes. I have yesterday’s paper and I will read the baseball.”

The bolded section of narrative summary above has the narrator showing the reader that the boy remembered the pot had been sold. The importance here is that it adds a new level of context to the exchange of dialogue. By showing the reader that the boy knows the pot has been sold, the reader can see that the boy’s response - “No. I will eat at home. Do you want me to make the fire?” - has a new meaning. The boy has chosen to interact in a way that protects the old man’s feelings. The narrator is not TELLING us that the boy is kind; he is SHOWING us, by adding context to the words. This is very powerful and should stir a deeper emotion in the reader.

The next section of this excerpt - “But they went through this fiction every day. There was no pot of yellow rice and fish and the boy knew this too” - is the narrator’s voice. Yet rather than the narrator TELL us that the boy is kind, the narrator reinforces the point, by adding more context.

The lesson here is that the narrative summary never TELLS us the boy is kind; instead, it SHOWS us.

In addition, we are learning something about the relationship of the two characters, the way in which they interact, and, perhaps most importantly, the things that are going unsaid. We, the readers, are left to ask these questions, to look between the lines and to see another, deeper story being told.

Example Two

This section comes later in the story. The old man is alone on the boat and has managed to catch the 'great fish'. He has been propped in his boat for many hours, unable to move, holding the line as the fish tries to escape.

The sun was hot now although the breeze was rising gently.

"I had better re-bait that little line out over the stern," he said. "If the fish decides to stay another night I will need to eat again and the water is low in the bottle. I don't think I can get anything but a dolphin here. But if I eat him fresh enough he won't be bad. I wish a flying fish would come on board tonight. But I have no light to attract them. A flying fish is excellent to eat raw and I would not have to cut him up. I must save all my strength now. Christ, I did not know he was so big."

"I'll kill him though," he said. "In all his greatness and his glory."

Although it is unjust, he thought. But I will show him what a man can do and what a man endures.

"I told the boy I was a strange old man," he said.

"Now is when I must prove it."

The thousand times that he had proved it meant nothing. Now he was proving it again. Each time was a new time and he never thought about the past when he was doing it.

The first thing to notice is that Hemingway has the old man talking aloud, perhaps to himself, perhaps to the fish, perhaps to God. The beauty of this is that it allows the author to keep the story moving without resorting, exclusively, to narrative summary.

The first section of narrative summary is clearly a thought: "Although it is unjust, he thought". Yet the thought adds context to the dialogue. The book's major theme is the fight between man and nature, and this simple thought pushes this into the reader's mind. It acts as a contrast between the action and a meaning for the action. Hemingway is using the action and the narrative summary to force the reader to think differently about man's role in the world.

The second section sees the narrator passing a judgment on the old man. The narrator is telling the reader something about the old man. It adds context to the character's action but forces the reader to think more deeply about the action. The old man says aloud, "I told the boy I was a strange old man," but it is the narrator who forces the reader to look more deeply into this statement. How is the old man strange? How has he proved it in the past? Why keep on proving it?

In these two examples, it can be seen that by both using a character's thoughts and the direct narrative voice, an author can insert additional context to a character's words and actions.

On the most basic level the job of narrative summary is to describe the actions of characters. However, there is a second more valuable and more powerful role. This is to force the reader into a place where the reader adds more depth and meaning to these words and actions. If done correctly, this will turn any good novel into a great novel and a work of art.

As one of the great ironies of novel-writing, this one simple strategy is the hardest of all. Authors, such as Hemingway, dedicated their whole careers to trying to make it work. For most authors, this is the most worthy and valuable of journeys.

GETTING PROFESSIONAL HELP

Well, if you got this far, let me start by saying thanks.

I wrote this book to help authors lift their technique to a new level. Over the years of running BubbleCow, I've edited more than five hundred books and worked with authors of all experience levels.

The biggest element I have taken from this experience is that writing is a journey.

A great example is the Show, Don't Tell Methodology detailed in this book. This is simple to teach and also logical to grasp. However, learning to apply it to your work in a way that lifts your book to a new level is a lifetime's quest.

The importance is not where you are on the journey but that you have taken your first step.

So where do you go from here?

Well, the first place is probably back to your current project. Return to your writing with fresh eyes and apply the techniques you've learned here. I'd suggest you start with the Camera Technique.

Once you have done this, you will probably look for a little more guidance, and that is when you should think about getting professional help.

I started BubbleCow in 2007, with the aim of providing the type of professional feedback that self-publishing authors needed to lift their books to the next level. I wanted to provide the type of feedback that an agent or publisher would give a traditionally published author.

But I wanted to give more …

The way we edit at BubbleCow is to focus on not only pointing out what is wrong but showing ways to make it right.

We see ourselves as much as teachers as we do as editors.

Take a look at our website to see what we can do for your book: https://bubblecow.com/