Dear Dimitri:

It looks like this assignment gave you some trouble as I can tell the idea of “show don’t tell” hasn’t quite sunk in yet. Specifically, in most of your paragraphs you gave away what was happening very directly (such as with the lottery and hitting the dog). Other times you did not give enough information, such as the trip to Arctic.

It’s also pretty clear that you did not read the directions carefully and that you tried to do the assignment too quickly. For example, the instructions said: “You will write five paragraphs, each describing a woman driving to a store, going shopping, and then driving home again.” But only one of your paragraphs mentioned a store, and then only briefly. So you weren’t supposed to describe the action as it happened, rather it is something in the past that she is dealing with as she goes to the store. Also, there was no maximum word count, only a minimum of 100 per paragraph.

Did you ever see the movie *Finding Nemo*? The director of *Finding Nemo* is a guy named Andrew Stanton. He once said, “Give the audience 2+2, but never give them 4.” That’s what you want to do. The key is that you have to give us lots of little details that ONLY hint at what the true thing could be. But let the reader figure it out. Try to think of your reader as a collaborator. They have to do the math, your job is to give them an equation that’s not too easy, but not too hard.

The one paragraph that had the right balance was the one about her friend leaving town. You wrote:

She was fighting tears as the car pulled away from the curb. Why were there always so many police officers and security guards in the middle of the road? They wouldn't be able to do anything during a terrorist attack. She supposed that it simply made people feel safer as they were coming and going. A small tear trickled down as she realized that now on, Karen could only talk to Ella though her phone. Karen felt betrayed; she’d tried to convince Ella out of such a bad decision, but this time, Ella wouldn’t listen. How long had Ella known this man? Not 19 years like they had! How could Ella change her entire life and leave just for romance. She pulled over near where the long term parking begins and watches as those impossible machines land and take off overhead, wondering which one is carrying her friend away, possibly forever.

Here you have a nice series of clues that the reader can use to solve the equation. For example, you don’t say she’s at the airport, but we know that she has just said goodbye to someone and that there is a lot of security around. Therefore, we can easily deduce that it’s an airport. We don’t know for certain the relationship between Karen and Ella, only that Karen must care about her a lot. Therefore, they are probably close friends or sisters. Lastly, I thought your last sentence was quite poetic, with the “impossible machines.” Nice job!

But since you really only got one of the five sentences right, I’d like you to rewrite three of these following the guidelines and my advice here. Please have these to me by the end of the day on Sunday, Sept. 27th.

One of the reasons these prompts used a store was so you could use the items in the store to hint at the character’s problem. So a woman who had been driving drunk would avoid the alcohol section because she felt guilty. A woman who had just won the lottery would fill her cart with ice-cream and chocolate and—when she checked out—eagerly donate 500 dollars to charity. A woman who had just gotten a divorce would look at the magazine covers in the checkout line and see a happy couple and start crying. If you look at your “trip to the arctic” you only mention that she bought a jacket. That’s not really enough. Get specific! What kind of jacket? And what else would she need to survive there?

Please let me know if you have any questions.

Mr. Nelson

P.S. Here’s an example that might help you:

A squirrel hastily scampered across the road, and Beatrice’s car yowled as she stomped on the brakes. Her breath was choppy as she tried to inhale. “Keep moving!” Other cars flowed around Beatrice as she inched her dented Volkswagen down the highway. She strained her eyes, desperate for a glimpse of the grocery store. Finally, Beatrice cautiously edged into the parking lot, triple checking for pedestrians. The chilly super-market air glided over her clammy skin, and she paused to inhale the stale refrigerator breeze. The woman scanned the swinging signs above each aisle. “Baking, Toilettries, Alchohol…” She pursed her lips, closed her eyes, and padded blindly to the alcohol section. The woman stepped towards a gleaming case of beer, then retreated. She took a deep breath and stepped forward again, extending her hand towards the drink. Then, she snapped her feet back and stuffed her hand behind her back. She continued to square-dance with the beer several more times, before she finally snatched the case off the shelf. Beatrice jogged out of the alcohol section and trailed her fingers through the moisture above her lips. A shelf piled with electric-yellow bags flashed in the corner of the woman’s eye. *Pet food.* Acidic liquid scalded her throat.

First the author established that she’s very nervous about driving. Then the author mentioned the dented car. The author was also smart to use the products in the store (first the alcohol, then the dog food) to trigger a reaction. That series of hints gives the reader the **equation** they need: (nervous driving + dented car + wants to drink but knows she shouldn’t + can’t look at pet section) = killed a dog while driving drunk.

Dimitri Chrysafis

Sep 9 2020

**I repeat: do not actually tell your reader what is happening at all. Be sure to provide enough clues and salient details so that your reader can “guess” which scenario this is.**

**She was driving drunk two nights ago and killed a dog in an accident.**

It was Friday night as Karen swerved from side to side, her car moving uncontrollably. Karen couldn’t understand why her friends tried to take her keys away; she was obviously not drunk and in total control.To prove that to herself, she started singing the alphabet as loud as she could. She may have missed a vowel or two, but she thought to herself “why were there so many in the first place.” FUNNY! As she barreled into the local park, she thought she saw someone walking with an animal jump in front AWK of them and crash into her. When she got out, she could not fully understand what was happening, however, she saw an animal on the floor, its eyes not moving. Slowly, she began to understand what had happened, and began shaking and trampling away from the scene. WRONG, NOT NARRATING

**She is leaving tomorrow for a three-month solo trek through the Arctic.**

It was Thursday when Karen found out that she will be replacing the original assistant, who had been acutely injured in a car accident. It had never happened this way. Researchers and government operatives normally had months of notice. Karen only had a few days to prepare for such an arduous journey. For this particular occasion, she needed a top-secret store. Unlike other such projects, this was hidden behind a cloak of secrecy, in a way that made her situation particularly difficult. How could she find the specific supplies she needed without tipping her hand. She went from store to store, not to be too suspicious, as this was top secret. She bought a jacket from one store, and a bikini from another to throw anyone who might be following her off. She told her relatives she had won a cruise and might be in Jamaica for 3 months. Then, it was show time. BETTER, BUT PROBABLY NOT ENOUGH CLUES, A JACKET IS ALL YOU CAN COME UP WITH?

**She just found out she won the lottery.**

Certain numbers had always had special meanings; 29 was the day she was born, 8 was her favorite age. She lived a moderate life and was not a gambler. She had a dream and wanted to try it just once, just for fun. She was in plain shock when the numbers matched, rubbing her eyes in shock, she hopped into her Toyota, and began to drive to Powerball’s headquarters. As she was driving, she was singing along to any song that appeared on the radio, dancing, and taking her hands off of the wheel occasionally. Once she arrived, she barged in with her ticket, yelling with joy. All the workers, baffled, asked for clarification as they did not believe this; no one had won in years. In jubilation, she began dancing; she tripped and hit her head. She woke up alone in her room, in her bed, realising it was a dream.

**She just dropped off her best friend, who is moving across the country, at the airport.**

She was fighting tears as the car pulled away from the curb. Why were there always so many police officers and security guards in the middle of the road? They wouldn't be able to do anything during a terrorist attack. She supposed that it simply made people feel safer as they were coming and going. A small tear trickled down as she realized that now on, Karen could only talk to Ella though her phone. Karen felt betrayed; she’d tried to convince Ella out of such a bad decision, but this time, Ella wouldn’t listen. How long had Ella known this man? Not 19 years like they had! How could Ella change her entire life and leave just for romance. She pulled over near where the long term parking begins and watches as those impossible machines land and take off overhead, wondering which one is carrying her friend away, possibly forever. OKAY, BETTER.

**She has to make an important speech to a large group of business associates that evening.**

As Karen sheepishly fabricated a short text, she kept repeating to herself “How could I forget, I had six weeks to prepare?” Everyone expected this to be perfect. From each individual slide to the handouts, they expected a woman in Karen’s position would have personally checked every single semicolon and revenue projection. Except she hadn’t. She’d put it off repeatedly. She felt ready to burst down in tears, and pinched herself, hoping it was a dream. She couldn’t have waited until the night before for something so pivotal. She whispered to no one, “Nothing shall stop me; I’ll use what I have.” She jumped off her bed, ran to her desk and began crafting different statements. She wrote for two hours non stop. Alas, when it was time to shine, the words flew like doves from her mouth. STILL, A BIT OBVIOUS.

* How difficult was it to avoid using abstractions and to concentrate instead on using the most specific showing details possible?
  + YES, I had to revise so many times just to make sure the message was not too clear and it was not easily guessable. It was definitely a challenging task to attempt to conceal my real definition. Although challenging, this assignment was fun, as I got the opportunity to try something new, and most writing classes say NOT to do.
* Which paragraph was the most fun to write—and which was the most difficult?
  + The most difficult part was the word count. I could never manage to get the amount of words to be less than 150. IT’S FINE TO GO OVER. I always went over, as I had so many ideas to write down. The most difficult part was the first one, as I was not familiar on how to make it unclear and challenging. I had no experience in that style of writing. This style was definitely fun, as I got to distract my reader, and only hint towards the truth.