Every writing student has heard the rule that you should show, not tell, but this principle seems to be among the hardest for beginners to master. First, what's the difference between the two? Well, "telling" is the reliance on simple exposition: Mary was an old woman. "Showing," on the other hand, is the use of evocative description: Mary moved slowly across the room, her hunched form supported by a polished wooden cane gripped in a gnarled, swollen-jointed hand that was covered by translucent, liver-spotted skin. Both showing and telling convey the same information -- Mary is old -- but the former simply states it flat-out, and the latter -- well, read the example over again and you'll see it never actually states that fact at all, and yet nonetheless leaves no doubt about it in the reader's mind.

Why is showing better? Two reasons. First, it creates mental pictures for the reader. When reviewers use terms like "vivid," "evocative," or "cinematic" to describe a piece of prose, they really mean the writer has succeeded at showing, rather than merely telling.

Second, showing is interactive and participatory: it forces the reader to become involved in the story, deducing facts (such as Mary's age) for himself or herself, rather than just taking information in passively. Let's try a more complex example:

Singh had a reputation for being able to cut through layers of bureaucracy and get things done.

Doubtless a useful chap to have around, this Singh, but he's rather a dull fellow to read about. Try this instead:

Chang shook his head and looked at Pryce. "All this red tape! We'll never get permission in time."
Suddenly the office door slid open, and in strode Singh, a slight lifting at the corners of his mouth conveying his satisfaction. He handed a ROM chip to Chang.
"Here you are, sir -- complete government clearance. You can launch anytime you wish."
Chang's eyebrows shot up his forehead like twin rockets, but Singh was already out the door. He turned to Pryce, who was leaning back in his chair, grinning.
"That's our Singh for you," said Pryce. "We don't call him the miracle worker for nothing."

In the first version, Singh is spoken about in the abstract, while in the second, we see him in the concrete. That's the key to showing: using specific action-oriented examples to make your point. When writing a romantic scene, don't tell us that John is attracted to Sally; show us that his heart skips a beat when she enters the room. It's rarely necessary to tell us about your characters' emotions. Let their actions convey how they feel instead.

(Notice that at the end of the second Singh version above, Pryce tells us about Singh. That's a special case: it's fine for one of your characters to say what he or she thinks of another; in fact, that's a good way to reveal characterization for both the person being spoken about and the person doing the speaking.)

Speaking of speaking (so to speak), a great way to show rather than tell is through dialog:

> Telling: Alex was an uneducated man.
> Showing: "I ain't goin' nowhere," said Alex.

Likewise, using modified speech to show a character's regional or ethnic origin can be quite effective, if done sparingly:

> Telling: "It's a giant spaceship with the biggest engines I've ever seen," said Koslov in a thick Russian accent.
> Showing: "It is giant spaceship with biggest engines I have ever seen," said Koslov.

The failure to use contractions shows us Koslov is uncomfortable with the language; the dropping of the articles "the" and "a" shows us that he's likely a Russian-speaker, a fact confirmed by his name. The reader hears the accent without you telling him that the character has one.

Don't overdo this, though. One of my favorite non-SF writers is Ed McBain, but frequently when he wants to demonstrate that a character is black, he descends into pages of offensively stereotypical Amos 'n' Andy dialog. Here's a character in McBain's Rumpelstiltskin musing on the local constabulary: "P'lice always say somebody done nothing a'tall, den next t'ing you know, they 'resting somebody."

Are there any times when telling is better than showing? Yes. First, some parts of a story are trivial -- you may want your reader to know a fact, without dwelling on it. If the weather is only incidental to the story, then it's perfectly all right to simply tell the reader "it was snowing." Indeed, if you were to show every little thing, the reader would say your story is padded.

Second, there's nothing wrong with relying on telling in your first drafts; I do this myself. When you're working out the sequence of events and the relationships between characters, it may cause you to lose sight of the big picture if you stop at that point to carefully craft your descriptions:

> First draft: It was a typical blue-collar apartment.
> Final draft: She led the way into the living room. It had only two bookcases, one holding bowling trophies and the other mostly CDs. There was a paperback book splayed open face down on the coffee table -- a Harlequin Romance. Copies of *The National Enquirer* and *TV Guide* sat atop a television set that looked about fifteen years old.

Note that showing usually requires more words than telling; the examples of the latter in this column take up 51 words, whereas those of the former total 210. Many beginning writers are daunted by the prospect of producing a long work, but once they master showing rather than telling, they find that the pages pile up quickly.

The third place where you'll still want to do a lot of telling is in the outlines for novels. Patrick Nielsen Hayden, a senior editor at Tor Books, says that some of the best outlines he's ever received contain lines such as, "Then a really exciting battle occurs." If the editor buys your book, he or she is trusting that you know how to convert such general statements into specific, action-oriented, colourful prose.

Finally, of course, showing is also better than telling in the process of becoming a writer. Don't tell your friends and family that you want to be a writer; rather, show them that you are one by planting yourself in front of your keyboard and going to work . . .