

## 2:2a Showing vs. Telling

### Your task in Your Activity Book 2.2:

Come up with a description about how hot it is in Arizona in the summertime OR how cold it is in Canada in the wintertime. Use sensory details, action, and/or dialogue to make the scene come alive to the reader. Avoid clichés (like “it was so hot you could fry an egg on the sidewalk”).

“Don’t tell us that the old lady screamed.  
Bring her on and let her scream.”

--Mark Twain



Example of “Telling” Writing:

Lauren was the best friend I could ever ask for, someone who was always there through thick and thin. When my mom died she was the only one who knew just what I needed. Everyone else seemed to say or do too much, but my best friend knew exactly what I needed.

Too many college essays (or narrative essay in general) suffer from this type of “telling writing.” The sentence explains the situation to your reader; however, it does little to give your reader a clear picture that *shows*

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Lauren to be the kind of friend you're describing her to be. What this sentence needs is more "showing writing"—dialogue, description, and action:

### Example of "Showing" Writing:

*Oh, great, I thought as the phone rang again. Who is it now?* The last thing I wanted was for another phone call, another "I just wanted you to know I am thinking about you and praying for you." Whether they could relate to the death of a parent or not, I was sick of it. Mustering up what little emotional energy I had left, my voice managed a cheery "Hello?"

"Megan, it's me. I just wanted you to know I'm thinking of you.

*You and the rest of the world, I thought. Get in line.*

"Megan, I.... Listen," Lauren stammered, "just look out on the porch."

On the steps the cup of hot chocolate steamed in the December cold. "Wait," I said. "Are you there? Lauren, you didn't have to..." The phone was dead as I saw her taillights swerve around the corner, but of all people Lauren was the friend most there for me.

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By the time the writer tells the reader that “Lauren was the friend most there” for her, she *showed* this to be the case. We don’t have to just take her word for it; we believe it because we have seen it, too. You see, the difference between “showing” and “telling” is what author Laura Elvin calls “narrative summary (no specific setting, characters, or dialogue). Readers need to ‘see’ events unfolding, infer tones and attitude, not have things described to them.... This is far easier than writing a scene, but it doesn’t make for good reading.”

College admittance officers don’t want to read huge chunks of exposition and long paragraphs of unwieldy explanation. In fact, if you infuse your essay with dialogue, your essay will stand out right away.



*Show, Don’t Tell* by William Noble explains that our writing “must not be a recitation of facts solely for the purpose of giving out information. The tendency to do this arises because we want to make sure the reader *understands!* We don’t want the reader to be confused or wondering, and we assume the best way to do this is by laying it all out.”

## 2:2d Showing vs. Telling

### Showing, Not Just Telling: What the East Can Teach Us in the West about Becoming More Effective Writers

Laura Elvin explains why we often settle for “telling” rather than “showing” writing. She points out that it is easier to tell and, conversely, more difficult to show. I agree with her assessment, but I believe that the motivations go even deeper.

We here in the West are inheritors of the legacy of the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment, roughly speaking, was a period beginning in 17<sup>th</sup> century Europe that placed reason and logic as the final judge for determining what is true. We have inherited this in Western culture. In the West, anything that we are trying to show to be true must pass the test of rational intelligibility—it must be reasoned out. Many trace this orientation back to the French philosopher Rene Descartes (pronounced “day-cart”) (1696-1750). He attempted to ground all philosophical and religious thinking in a new and solid starting point. In his writings he sets forth his famous criterion of *methodical doubt*, insisting that he would accept nothing as true unless he perceived it as very clear and distinct. The long and

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short of things is that we in the West have inherited this emphasis on stripping things down to their bare minimum and then building them up again.

But is this the only way to do things?  
Certainly not.



### \*Western

- \*Reason
- \*Objective
- \*Cognition
- \*Description
- \*Tell
- \*Definition
- \*Logic
- \*Conceptual
- \*Reason and logic

### \* Eastern

- \*Experience
- \*Subjective
- \*Mystery
- \*Story
- \*Show
- \*Metaphor
- \*Art
- \*Perceptual
- \*Practical experience

Think back to the essays you have read that have worked. **They are full of incidents, stories, and practical experience—as well as description and definition.** In short, they are *global*—incorporating both “Eastern” and “Western” qualities.

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So what is the best way to infuse your writing with “showing” details? Here’s some practical advice:

1. **Use specific details.** The more specific you are, the better the reader knows what is going on. (This said, one should be careful to avoid needless detail!). One way to infuse a sentence with showing detail is to take a simple sentence and increase it with details by adding to it (example from <http://www.uoflife.com/wc/creative/concrete.htm>):



- My lawn was covered with leaves.
- Leaves blew through my yard and piled up against the shrubs and fence.
- A cold autumn breeze blew leaves through my yard. I stared out the window and watched them pile up against the sparse shrubs and worn out fence.
- A cold autumn breeze blew leaves through my yard. Summer had ended and I would be the last one to leave the cabin. I sat alone, holding a mug

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of hot chocolate without drinking, and stared out the back window, watching the red, gold, and brown leaves pile up violently against the sparse shrubs and worn out fence. I had long since given up caring about anything.



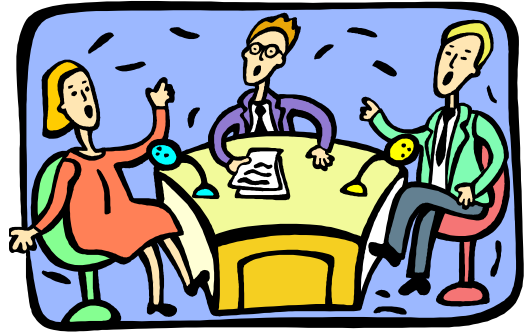
2. **Use sensory images:** When appropriate, give your reader all five senses. The reader should be able to see, feel, hear, smell, taste.

3. **Use metaphors** to liven up your descriptions; however, avoid clichés. For instance, don't tell us that you felt like a 98-pound weakling. *Show* us.

4. **Vary Your Sentence Structure.** Recall our discussion of sentence fluency. Is there a magic sentence length? No, but if your sentence structure is the same, and your sentence length is the same, you'll put your reader to sleep. Also remember that a short sentence can effectively spark your writing. No, not just spark. Inflammate.

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5. Use **specific actions and dialogue** to make your point come alive. Take another look at the “Laura was the best friend anyone could ask for” example to see how powerful specific actions and dialogue can be.



6. **Don't be afraid of using telling writing sometimes, too.** The key is to have a balance. Most writers fall into the trap of having too much telling and not enough showing.

**Writing Exercise (in your Activity Book 2:2):** You have already come up with a “My writing is like...” simile. A simile can often be a powerful way to express who you are to a college admissions officer. Your task: come up with a “My life has been like...” simile. Unpack the simile for the reader (explain it).