

## HOW TO WRITE FICTION - HOW TO WRITE A STORY THAT COMES ALIVE

Questions: How can I write vivid descriptions? How can I invent characters that feel like real people? How can I create suspense? How can I can I make readers care about my stories?

### How to write fiction that shows instead of tells

Writing fiction is like trying to convince someone you're cool. As in, the best tactic might not be to walk up to the person and say, "Hello, I'm super-cool." No, instead, you'd choose cool clothes.

How does this apply to fiction? If you tell a reader something, the reader has to take your word for it. But if you show it to the reader, then the impact is a lot more powerful.

### Examples of showing versus telling

Example of telling: Lois was a horribly messy person.

Example of showing: Hey, there's my sandwich!' Lois exclaimed triumphantly, spying yesterday's meatball sub protruding from the heap of dirty laundry on the backseat of her car.

What if, instead of messy, Lois were compulsively neat? Think about how you could show that. What does a compulsively neat person do? (I know someone who organizes her kitchen cabinets in perfect rows, measuring the exact space between the items with a ruler). What situations bring out a person's compulsive neatness?

Here's another example of telling: It was a hot day.

Example of showing: Her shirt stuck to the small of her back, and sweat rolled down her thighs as she trudged across the parched grass to the porch, where a collie panted in the thin shadow offered by the rocking chair.

Notice some advantages of showing versus telling:

- ✚ It's more interesting to read.
- ✚ It creates a sharper mental picture.
- ✚ It provides more information. The last "showing" example lets you know something about what kind of hot weather it was, neither the silken warmth of a tropical beach or the deadly scorch of the desert.
- ✚ It's convincing. If I say it was a hot day, you'll probably trust me on that. But if I say Lois is horribly messy, you might wonder if she's really as bad as I'm claiming. For all you know, I'm a neat freak, and Lois has things in better perspective. With the "showing" example, you can judge for yourself.
- ✚ It's possible to do more than one thing at a time. You can show the reader that the weather's hot at the same time that you walk your character up her front yard to her porch and introduce her dog.

"But if Lois is a mess, can't I just say she's a mess?" Sure, you can. And there are times when you should. A few reasons to tell something instead of showing

- ✚ It's not important.
- ✚ It's boring. You might show me your character falling asleep in biology class, but please don't subject me to the entire biology lecture.
- ✚ It's background information you want to communicate efficiently.

- ✚ Telling just works better. If you want me to know that your character's from Ohio, you can say so. It's not necessary to leave Ohio bus tickets lying around his room or to have him drop "Go Buckeyes!" into the conversation.

Exercise: how to write fiction that shows

Replace each "telling" sentence with "showing" ones.

Example:

Telling - They were angry.

Showing - He slammed his water glass down on the table so hard her plate rattled. Still, she refused to look at him, glaring instead at her napkin, which she was ripping into shreds with her fingernails.

Telling - She was a very organized person.

Showing -

Telling - It was a cold day.

Showing -

Telling - She had a secret crush on her realtor.

Showing -

**Fiction writing prompts - creative writing ideas with a focus on: character development.**

### 1) Short story ideas - dating deception

Your character meets someone on an online dating site. Your character writes an e-mail to the person, describing him/herself. Write the e-mail. This e-mail contains two lies. What are they? Why did the character tell them? Also: your character has a very mistaken idea of the impression he/she makes on other people. What impression does your character think he/she makes? What impression does he/she really make? Figure all this stuff out. If you want, fill out a character profile. The character arranges an in-person meeting with the person he/she has met online. What happens at the meeting? Write the story.

### 2) Write about any of the following characters:

- A woman who is constantly calling the police on her noisy neighbors, not because the noise bothers her but because she enjoys the fight.
- A woman who wants to be a singer but has no talent.
- A boy who teases girls because he likes them and doesn't want them to guess.
- An aerobics instructor who develops an addiction to junk food that is making her fat and threatening her job.
- A very handsome guy who is sick of being admired only for his looks.

### 3) Short story ideas - old dreams

Your character has a family and a stable job. Then something happens that reminds him of the plans he had when he was younger, to become an actor and live a creative life without ties of any kind.

What happens to make him remember this? He starts to wonder if he's made the right choices. What does he do?

#### 4) Short story ideas - reluctant confrontation

Invent a teenage character who is very shy and hates confrontations of any kind. Her friend Stacy gets into serious trouble at school, and your character knows that the situation is a teacher's fault, not Stacy's. Your character wants to help Stacy, but all of her options seem terrifying: confront the teacher directly, talk to the principal, or tell a parent who might not believe her. What does she do? Write the story.

Source: adapted from <http://www.creative-writing-now.com>