

Show, Don't Tell!

When describing a character's feelings, skilful writers do not just 'tell' the reader how the character feels. They 'show' the reader by using *imagery*.

Imagery is language that paints a vivid picture in the mind of the reader, often by appealing to the five senses: sight, sound, smell, taste and touch.

In the following examples, compare the sentences that 'tell' us how the character feels with the descriptions that 'show' us how the character feels. Answer the questions that follow each description.

1. Joey missed his father.

[Joey] hadn't seen his father for a long, long time – not since he was in kindergarten. He couldn't remember his father's face very well. But at night, he could still hear him say, "Good night, Joey. I love you."

a) From the description, how do you know that Joey misses his father?

b) Which of the five senses does the description appeal to?

2. Alvin hated his grandfather.

Alvin hated the way [his grandfather] was always watching. The slack, distorted mouth, twisted to one side after last year's stroke. The thin arms, bulging veins... he couldn't look at him anymore. He thought he could smell him though – a waft of stale piss.

a) From the description, how do you know that Alvin hates his grandfather?

b) Which of the five senses does the description appeal to?

3. Old Mr Chan was hot and tired.

[Old Mr Chan] used a tissue to wipe the sweat from his face. He got ready for the slow, steep walk up the stairs. 'Every day, it's the same,' he thought.

a) From the description, how do you know that old Mr Chan is hot and tired?

b) Which of the five senses does the description appeal to?

Here are a few more examples that illustrate the difference between 'telling' and 'showing' how a character feels.

Do not <i>tell</i> the reader...	Show the reader!
Joey was afraid. There was a storm. The lights went out.	<i>The lights suddenly went out. In the darkness, the wind and rain grew louder and seemed closer...Joey sat still, his heart beating fast. It made a 'thump, thump, thump' noise in his chest.</i> Stuart Mead, 'A Knock at the Door'
Alvin's mother was angry. She hit Alvin. It was very painful.	<i>She had moved so quickly, her hand going back and across in one movement, slapping his left cheek with a crack that silenced the room. The pain hung hot on his cheek.</i> Adrian Tilley, 'Victim'
Bill was frightened. He thought someone was behind him.	<i>It seemed a shadow had fallen over him. But there was no shadow. His heart had given a great jump up into his throat and was choking him. Then his blood slowly chilled and he felt the sweat of his shirt cold against his flesh.</i> Jack London, 'All Gold Canyon'

4. I was in the waiting room. I was nervous.

Rewrite this description by 'showing' the reader what it was like to be nervous. Appeal to the senses and focus on the physical body's response to the emotion. Focus on the face, the eyes, the mouth, the hair, the skin, the heart, the blood, the pulse, the sweat, the breath and the tears, etc. Show, don't tell!