

Show, Don't Tell!

"Don't tell us that the old lady screamed. Bring her on and let her scream."
-Samuel Clemens (aka Mark Twain)

Define these words:

- cool
- fun
- weird
- pretty
- scary
- ugly

What does each of these things LOOK like? SMELL like? FEEL like? These are actually **opinions, NOT descriptions**. What's "cool" to you could be "gross" or "bizarre" to me (I'm not too into my son's "cool" low-hanging pants, for instance). As a reader, I better understand and appreciate your words when you use your word sense and show me what everything looks, sounds, tastes, smells, and feels like. This is called using **sensory language**.

Examples

Paragraph One—The *Telling* Paragraph

The bus stopped. People came off and the bus left, but the people waiting by the bus didn't get on. All the people looked weird and bad. They looked like they were crazy. I couldn't believe it.

Paragraph Two—The *Showing* Paragraph

A bus arrived. It let out its passengers, closed its doors with a hiss, and disappeared over the crest of the hill. Not one of the people waiting at the bus stop had attempted to board. One woman wore a sweater that was too small, a long loose skirt, white socks, and slippers. One man was wearing a swimsuit and his snorkeling gear, and smelled like a combination of leftover pizza and my sister's grape lip gloss. Another man wore shoes with the toes cut out, a blue jacket with what looked like coffee stains, and brown pants with pink polka dots. There was definitely something different about these people.

Practice

EXPAND! Show! Turn each of the following sentences into full paragraphs by adding details and description. What does it look like? Smell like? Sound like? Feel like? You won't use all of your senses all of the time, but it's a good way to start. When I read your paragraphs, I should feel like I'm there.

1. That guy is fun.
2. She's a bully.
3. The new field house is cool.
4. My dog loves going on walks.

Putting on a Real Good Show (Not Tell) ...

1. Uses Specific Details/Examples

Use details that go beyond the obvious or predictable!

2. Uses Sensory Images

Can we SEE it? Hear? Smell? Touch? What does it look like?

3. Uses (Good) Comparisons to Other Things

The comparisons should help the reader visualize.

4. Uses Various Sentence Structures

Long sentences. Short sentences. Different beginnings. It should flow smoothly.

5. Fresh Ideas

Avoid writing the same old thing or the obvious!

6. Uses Active Verbs

Remember: you don't just "go" to the store!

7. No "Padding"

Longer isn't always better. Avoid repetition and unnecessary words.

8. Proofread for Major Errors

Read it OUT LOUD! Have someone read it over! Use proofing sheets! (And avoid overusing exclamation points!)