

#### 14. SHOW OR TELL: WHICH IS BETTER?

Novice writers (and some professionals) often fall into the trap of “expositing” information instead of presenting it dramatically. Sometimes exposition is inevitable, or even desirable. Gabriel García Márquez can write superb exposition for page after page. Most of us ordinary mortals, however, need to dramatize our characters and their feelings. Otherwise our readers will tire of our editorials.

Consider the following expository and dramatic passages. Which more adequately conveys what the author is trying to show to the reader?

Vanessa was a tall woman of 34 with shoulder-length red hair and a pale complexion. She often lost her temper; when she did, her fair skin turned a deep pink, and she often swore. She was full of energy, and became impatient at even the slightest delay or impediment to her plans. Marshall, her chief assistant, was a balding, mild-mannered, nervous man of 54 who was often afraid of her. He was also annoyed with himself for letting her boss him around.

Vanessa abruptly got up from her desk. A shaft of sunlight from the window behind her seemed to strike fire from her long red hair as she shook her head violently.

“No, Marshall! God damn it, this won’t do! Didn’t I make myself clear?”

“Yes, Vanessa, b-but —”

“And you understood what I told you, didn’t you?” Her pale skin was flushing pink, and Marshall saw the signs of a classic outburst on the way. She took a step toward him, forcing him to look up to meet her gaze; she must be a good three inches taller. He raised his hands in supplication, then caught himself and tried to make the gesture look like the smoothing of hair he no longer had. He felt sweat on his bald scalp.

“Vanessa, it was a —”

“It was another one of your screw-ups, Marshall! We’re committed to a Thursday deadline. Now, I’m going to make that damn deadline, whether or not you’re here to help me. Okay, am I going to get some cooperation from you, or not?”

Marshall nodded, cursing himself for his slavish obedience. Fifty-four years old, and taking orders from a bitch twenty years younger. Why didn’t he just tell her to shove it?

“All the way, Vanessa. We’ll get right on it.”

“Damn well better.” Her voice softened; the pink faded from her cheeks. “Okay, let’s get going.”

**Comment:** A paragraph of exposition has turned into a scene: the portrayal of a conflict and its resolution. The scene has also prepared us for further scenes. Maybe Marshall’s going to destroy himself for Vanessa, or poison her; maybe Vanessa’s going to learn how to behave better. Most importantly, the authorial judgments in the exposition are now happening in the minds of the characters and the mind of the reader – who may well agree with Marshall, or side with Vanessa.

Here’s another example:

Jerry was 19. Since leaving high school a year before, he had done almost nothing. He had held a series of part-time jobs, none of them lasting more than a few weeks. His girl friend Judy, meanwhile, was holding down two summer jobs to help pay for her second year of college. Jerry controlled her with a combination of extroverted charm and bullying sulkiness. Secretly he envied her ambition and feared that she would leave him if he ever relaxed his grip on her.

“Hey, good-lookin’,” Jerry said as he ambled into the coffee shop and took his usual booth by the window.

“Hi,” said Judy. She took out her order pad.

“Hey, I’m real sorry about what I said last night. I was way outa line.”

“Would you like to order?”

“Hey, I said I was *sorry*, all right? Gimme a break.”

“That’s fine. But Murray says not to let my social life get in the way of my job. So you’ve got to order something for a change.”

He snorted incredulously. “Hey, I’m broke, babe.”

She stared out the window at the traffic. “You can’t hang out here all day for the price of a cup of coffee, Jerry. Not any more. Murray says he’ll have to let me go if you do.”

“Well, tell him to get stuffed.”

“Jerry, be reasonable. I *can’t*. I need...this...job.”

“Christ, you already got the job at the movie theatre.”

“That’s nights, and it hardly pays anything. I’ve got my whole second year at college to pay for this summer. Jerry, maybe we can talk about this after I get off work, okay?”

“Yeah, right. See you Labor Day, then.”

“Jerry, don't be a smartass. See you at four, okay?”

He got up, shrugging. “Yeah, sure. Guess I’ll go over to the bus station and read comic books until then.” He glared at her. “Don’t be too nice to the guys who come in here. I find out you been fooling around with anybody, you know you’re in trouble, right?”

“Right, Jerry. I’m really sorry. See you later.”

**Comment:** Again we have a conflict that promises to lead to further conflicts and their resolution. We want to know if Judy will ditch Jerry, or Jerry will smarten up. Their relationship reveals itself through their dialogue, not through the author’s editorializing.

Note that both these examples involve a *power struggle*. Someone is determined to be the boss, to get his or her way. Most scenes present such a struggle: someone decides on pizza or hamburgers for dinner, someone chooses the date for D-Day, someone comes up with the winning strategy to defeat the alien invaders or elect the first woman president. We as readers want to see the resources thrown into the struggle: raw masculinity, cynical intelligence, subtle sexual manipulation, political courage, suicidal desperation.

Depending on which resources win, we endorse one myth or another about the way the world operates: that raw masculinity always triumphs, that political courage leads nowhere, and so on. Of course, if we are writing ironically, we are rejecting the very myths we seem to support. By using raw macho bullying mixed with a little self-pity, Jerry seems to win his power struggle with Judy. But few readers would admire him for the way he does it, or expect him to succeed in the long term with such tactics.

Think carefully about this as you develop your scenes. If your hero always wins arguments in a blaze of gunfire, he may become awfully tiresome awfully fast. If your heroine keeps bursting into tears, your readers may want to hand her a hankie and tell her to get lost. Ideally, the power struggle in each scene should both tell us something new and surprising about the characters, and hint at something still hiding beneath the surface – like the insecurity that underlies Jerry’s and Vanessa’s bullying.

**Assignment:**

The first couple of chapters of your novel probably contain some “tell” exposition: a sentence reporting that your heroine went to the Sorbonne for summer school, or that your hero is not very tall.

Convert one or two such items into “show” scenes—maybe the hero is greeting the heroine at the airport with a bouquet, eager to ask her how she liked the summer in Paris.

When you’re comfortable converting “tell” into “show” go through your whole manuscript and repeat the process. You will notice how much more interesting and complex your story has become.

From Write a Novel (<http://crofsblogs.typepad.com/novel/>), a resource created by Crawford Kilian, Communications Instructor at Capilano College, North Vancouver BC.

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