Show, Don't Tell
Cheat Sheet

Showing

Creating vivid, immersive scenes by allowing the reader to experience the story through sensory details, actions, and dialogue. It engages the reader's imagination and emotions.

Telling

Conveying information directly to the reader, summarizing events or emotions without immersive detail. It provides clarity and efficiency but can distance the reader from the experience.

When to Show vs. Tell

Showing

- Creating a particularly immersive scene
- Developing a character or engaging them with your reader more
- Highlighting key moments

Telling

- Conveying information quickly
- Summarize less important events
- Maintain or alter your pace

Avoid Over-Showing

Be Selective: Choose details that enhance the story. Not every moment needs elaborate description.

Prioritize Impact: Focus on scenes that significantly affect the plot or characters.

Mix Techniques: Balance detailed showing with concise telling for pacing.

Tips for Showing

Vivid Imagery

- **Paint a picture:** Use specific, concrete details to create clear images in the reader's mind.
- **Metaphors & similes:** Employ figurative language to enhance descriptions and add depth.

Sensory Details

- **Engage the senses:** Use sight, hearing, touch, smell, and taste to engage readers.
- **Don't overdo it:** One or two sensory details is usually enough to draw a reader into a scene.

Actions & Reactions

- **Show emotion:** Let your reader infer emotions through actions, gestures, facial expressions, etc.
- **Reactions reveal:** How characters react to a situation shows their inner thoughts and relationships without stating them.

Dialogue

- **A type of action:** Dialogue is a type of action that can give us the best insight into a character.
- **Subtext:** What is unsaid or implied in dialogue is a strong way to show underlying emotions and tension.

Common Show, Don't Tell Pitfalls

Overuse of adverbs: Replace adverbs with stronger verbs or actions ("She said angrily" vs. "She snapped").

Infodumps: Avoid overwhelming the reader with excessive background information. Integrate details naturally and show it with actions or reactions.

Lack of Focus: Ensure every detail serves a purpose and contributes to the story.