

What is **TELLING** in Writing?

Telling (vs. showing) is when you use words to explain what a character is doing or feeling, rather than giving the action or feeling itself in the POV of the character.

The dictionary defines “Telling” as follows: to give an account or report; to give evidence or be an indication:

Whereas “**Showing**” is: to cause or allow to be seen; exhibit; display; to be seen; be or become visible

And what is PASSIVE VOICE?

The dictionary defines “Passive” as: *not participating readily or actively; inactive; not involving visible reaction or active participation; inert.*

Essentially, Passive Voice is when you explain what a character is feeling or how they are reacting vs. actually giving the character those emotions or feelings.

Ways writers “tell” vs. “show.”

Feel / Felt

Is / Was

“LY” words

Dialogue Tags

Began to / Started to

Long Descriptions

Internal Dialogue

1. Feel / Felt: This is one I am guilty of doing. I have a tendency to default to describing emotions or feelings rather than showing them.

Examples:

Amy felt her face turn red with embarrassment.

“Amy felt” describes the feeling, rather than simply allowing the character to experience them.

A better way to phrase this would be:

Amy’s face turned red with embarrassment.

Better, but not perfect. Why?

Amy's face heated.

Amy's cheeks and ears flushed with heat.

Warmth crept up Amy's neck, to her cheeks.
Even her ears burned.

2. Is / Was: This is a common issue because we use “is” and “was” words in our conversations with others.

“I was really angry.”

“I was so excited!”

“My mother is so concerned.”

I closed my eyes and counted to ten.

My fingers curled into fists.

My body shook, hot tears threatening to spill.

3. “LY” words: Oh, those wretched adverbs. They make it so easy to explain what’s going on. Oops, did I say, *explain*? Yep, there it is. The TELL. And I’m going to link this one to another in the list, because they usually go together...
4. Dialogue Tags. This is where you tag the dialogue rather than using action to show who is saying the words.

Example:

“Don’t go,” Sam said. –Dialogue tag.

“Don’t go.” Sam took Amy’s hand. –Action beat.

“You can’t go,” Sam shouted angrily.

Here we have a dialogue tag and an adverb, telling us how Sam feels. Now let’s try an action beat instead, and no adverb.

“You can’t go!” Sam’s fists clenched, knuckles white.

5. Began to / Started to: This is one of my least favorite because it seems so obvious, yet I still catch myself using them! LOL

Here are some examples pulled (ugh) from my own writing:

He started to hold his hands out over the man's chest.

Ugh. So wrong. A contest judge finally asked me, “why tell us he started to do this instead of just having him DO it?” Her example:

He held his hands over the mans' chest.

The vines began to move.

The vines moved.

Movement caught my eye. Green tendrils slithered.

Papery hisses sent chills up my spine—the vines
moved.

6. Long Descriptions: This one is a bit more subjective, but definitely still needs to be included in our list. Using descriptions is important, but we must be careful not to turn showing into telling as we describe.

Let's look at an example:

Sam pressed the arrow button to send the text message.

What really happened:

Sam sent the text.

Here's another example:

Sam swung his leg over the side of the horse, landing on the grass as he dismounted.

Vs.

Sam dismounted.

Sam grimaced as he swung his leg over the horse, legs shaking when they hit the ground.

Conversely, sometimes using too little information can be telling.

Telling:

Amy was physically and emotionally exhausted.

Showing:

All Amy wanted to do was crawl into bed and sleep. But first, she would cry. She didn't have enough strength to hold it together for even one minute longer.

7. **Internal Dialogue:** This is a tricky one, which is why I've left it for last. Internal dialogue can be a great tool, but it has to be used well and should not be overdone. It should also NOT be used in place of showing the character's emotions or feelings.

Example:

Sam walked to the door. *I wonder if she'll be home? What will she be thinking? I'm so nervous she'll be mad at me,* he thought to himself.

Sam wiped sweaty hands on his pants as he walked up to the door. He hesitated before knocking, unsure what would be worse—her angry face appearing at the door, or finding out she'd left.